Nanigashi Shima
Illustration by
raemz
Love Unseen Beneath the Clear Night Sky

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Ushio Narumi
Kakeru Sorano
Yuuko Hayase
Koharu Fuyutsuki
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Contents

1 First Meeting

2 The Terrace

3 Love

4 Monja

5 The Sound of a Piano

6 The Yellow Bookmark

7 Drawn Fireworks

8 Summer Break

9 The Children's Fireworks

10 Two Red Buds

11 Yuuko Hayase

12 Ushio Narumi

13 Kakeru Sorano

Afterword

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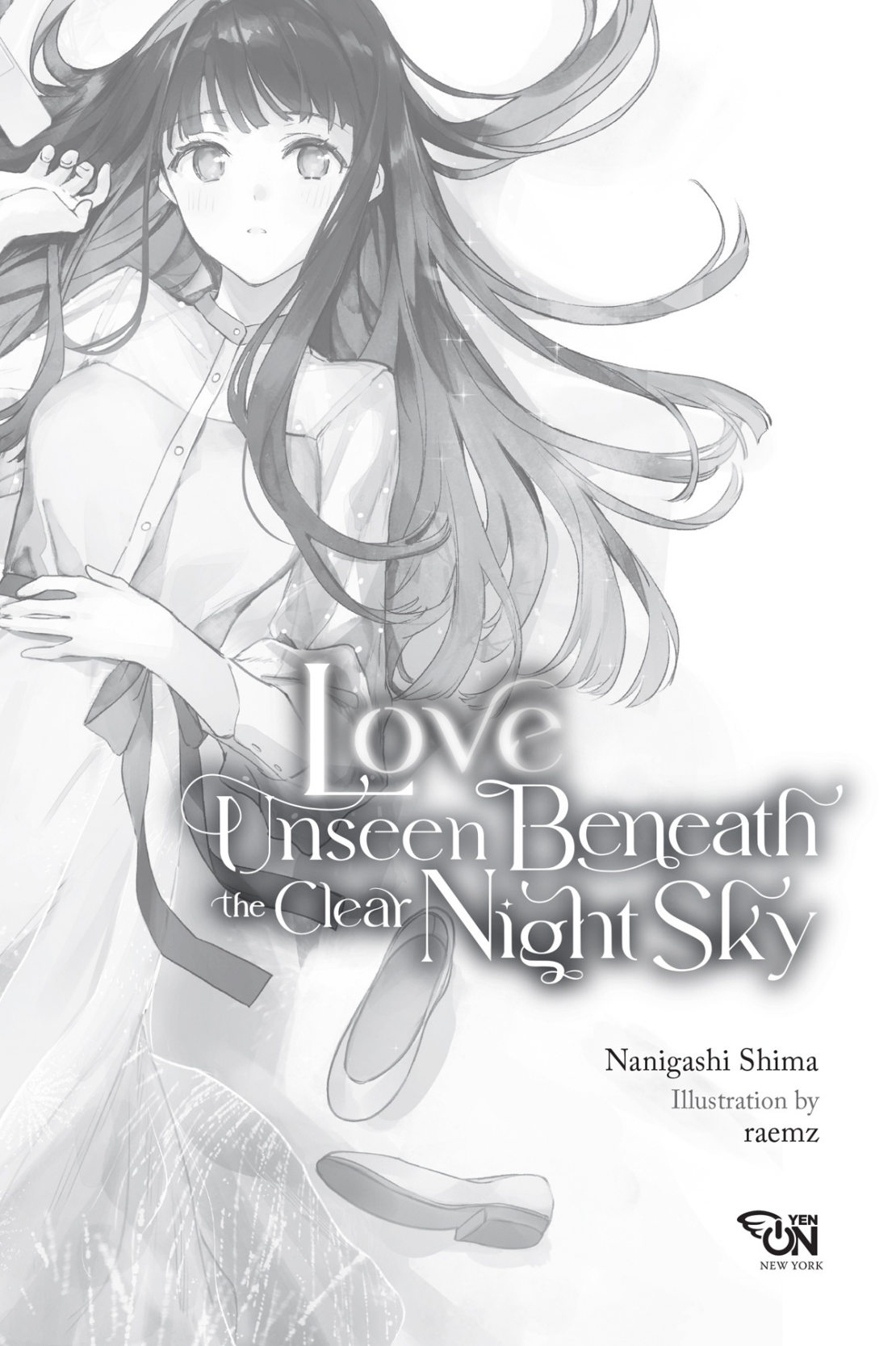

Love Unseen Beneath the Clear Night Sky

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

1. First Meeting

2. The Terrace

3. Love

4. Monja

5. The Sound of a Piano

6. The Yellow Bookmark

7. Drawn Fireworks

8. Summer Break

9. The Children’s Fireworks

10. Two Red Buds

11. Yuuko Hayase

12. Ushio Narumi

13. Kakeru Sorano

Afterword

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Ik wil nog voortleven, ook na mijn dood!
I want to go on living even after my death!

Anne Frank, April 5, 1944

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1. First Meeting

◎

The doctor was standing by the bed, holding his hands behind his back.

Flowers decorated the windowsill, their white heads blooming at the end of long, thick stalks.

They almost looked like fireworks exploding in the night sky. Every time the white curtains fluttered in the breeze, I could smell the sweet scent of the flowers.

The doctor spoke again.

I should have been prepared for what he was about to say—but my voice came out intermingled with tears.

"I've had enough. Let's end this."

*

Just as I was nodding off, Narumi's loud voice woke me up.

He must have just told one of those one-liners he'd learned back home in Kansai. I opened my eyes and saw that everyone else was clapping and laughing.

I might have missed one of Narumi's jokes, but I wasn't disappointed in the least. In fact, I was just annoyed he'd woken me up. As he sat back down, I prodded him with my elbow.

"Oh, Sorano," he said. "You're awake."

Narumi patted me on the back with a cheery expression on his face.

"I had a weird dream," I told him.

"What kinda dream?"

"The depressing kind."

"Whaddaya mean?"

We were at a freshman party held jointly by a number of different clubs to welcome new members.

I was sitting next to Narumi—who'd forced me to come along—right at the back of the room. We could see the entire venue from here.

I lacked any kind of enthusiasm for the party *and* I was low on sleep. I was being a total party pooper.

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“Lighten up, won’cha? Since you made the effort to show up, ya might as well enjoy it.”

“It wasn’t my choice to come. You just brought me here.”

Narumi was my roommate back at our college dorm. He’d suggested we “change up the room” the night before, and I’d ended up doing just that until the early hours of the morning.

Thanks to him, I’d been sleepy all day long. I thought I’d finally get the chance to sleep once my lectures were over, but he’d ended up dragging me to this freshman welcome party.

Beside me, Narumi looked around the room with a chipper expression.

How much stamina does this guy have…?

I pondered that question as I took a sip from my glass of oolong tea and glanced around the room.

The scene unfolding in front of me was surreal.

The “Super Mega Joint Freshman Welcome Party” had started out pretty sedate. The president from each club had said a few words, then raised their glasses in such a grandiose toast you’d have been forgiven for assuming they were drinking champagne.

So how had things ended up like this?

The large room, filled with around forty freshmen, had descended into chaos.

No one was staying in their seats. Instead, they all drifted around like zombies, holding their drinks in one hand.

Noodles had been added to the hot pot sitting on one of the tables to turn it into *champon*, but nobody had even bothered picking up their chopsticks. It just kept simmering until the noodles lost all their elasticity.

Anyway, some flirty guys were chatting enthusiastically with the girls, raising their voices to make themselves heard, while a group of nerdy-looking people sat hunched over in the corner. I also spotted some girls with thick makeup on, laughing and clapping their hands like broken toys—though I had no idea what they could be finding so funny.

We were in a bar, in a room partitioned off by a set of sliding doors, and the excited atmosphere made it seem hot and stuffy. Everyone was talking so loud I felt like it was getting a bit hard to breathe with the amount of carbon dioxide in the room.

I pulled at the collar of my T-shirt, trying to create some sort of breeze. Between the heat and the air quality, the discomfort index was off the charts, so I was desperate to get outside.

But just as that thought crossed my mind, someone who sounded a lot older than us started singing “Happy Birthday” in a loud, raspy voice. It was coming from the room next door—the one separated from ours by the sliding doors—which prompted our table to start clapping and singing, too, as if it was some sort of call-and-response.

They were celebrating the birthday of a total stranger we couldn’t even see.

Maybe the people over there had requested this in advance, or maybe it was some kind of flash mob. A few guys around me were trying to stand out by overdoing the vibrato, singing “Happy Birthdaaaay…toooo yoooou” a beat off. Not to be outdone, others shouted “Happy Birthdaaaaaay!!” so loudly I wouldn’t have been surprised if they’d ruptured their vocal cords. If it *was* a flash mob, it was a very weird and poorly executed one, so I could only assume it was a spur-of-the-moment sort of thing.

I felt like I was in a zoo, watching all the caged animals howling in unison.

“Thank you!” came a young woman’s voice from the other side.

A few of the guys began edgily suggesting that they take a peek at the mystery woman—earning them silent glares from the girls.

Ugh…

“You look grossed out.”

My discomfort must have shown on my face. Narumi was smirking, which made me feel even more awkward.

“Who *wouldn’t* be grossed out by that?” I said.

“Who cares? It’s funny.”

“I don’t find any of this even remotely funny.”

“Awww…”

Narumi’s teasing annoyed me a little, so I subtly pointed to a table two away from ours.

“I mean, don’t you find *that* a little gross?”

A group of boys were swarming all over a girl there.

The topic of conversation had shifted from “Join our club” to prying into her love life. When the tantalizing revelation came to light that she was single and living alone, the discussion eventually descended into an unabashed self-promotion session. If she mentioned she didn’t like smoking, all the guys would immediately put out their cigarettes. If she said she liked the veins on a man’s arms, they’d all roll up their sleeves.

“It’s not *that* gross, is it? You must be a total saint, Sorano.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

Narumi waved a hand dismissively. “Nah. Still, I guess you’re just one o’ *those* people.”

He gave me a knowing smile.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“I mean, look at ya. You got your back against the wall, refusing to move from your spot. Everyone else is out there tryin’ desperately to connect with other people.”

“It’s that desperation I find so—”

But before I could finish my sentence, I heard a clap from a table in the back.

“Can I have everyone’s attention?”

I think he was the president of some club, but I couldn’t remember which one. It might have been something music related, or an athletic one. I didn’t think it was the tennis club, but then again, it may well have been. Anyway, a guy with light brown hair and a playboy vibe had risen from his seat.

“I have an important announcement to make!”

His voice was brimming with confidence—the kind that made someone sound like they’d never had a hard day in their life. To be honest, I found his overconfident attitude pretty annoying. Maybe other people found it funny, though, because I could hear a few chuckles.

His exaggerated pauses had attracted people’s attention…or so I’d thought. Instead, people had started digging into the now cold *champon*, and slurping sounds echoed from all corners of the room.

Still, the guy wasn’t going to let a little noise stop him. He certainly wouldn’t come out of this looking any cooler, but he was going to make his announcement no matter what. Either he’d drunk too much to hear properly, or he was made of incredibly tough stuff mentally.

“Freshman Yuuko Hayase!”

As it turned out, Hayase was one of the slurpers. She put some more noodles into her mouth and made a face that seemed to say *Huh, me?*

When the people around her urged her to stand up, she did so, covering her mouth with one hand while she chewed. She used her other hand to try to comb her hair a bit, as if uncomfortable.

Curious gazes converged on the new student.

The guy ran a hand through his hair and gave her an intense look. The girl, on the other hand, didn’t take any notice of him; she just glanced around the room, clearly embarrassed. It didn’t seem like they were going to gaze dramatically into each other’s eyes anytime soon.

He took in a sharp breath.

“I’ve never fallen in love at first sight before, but I honestly don’t think I can keep this in. Will you go out with me?”

Who did this guy think he was? Any sober person would be completely disgusted.

Yet the inebriated crowd erupted into applause.

“Say yes! Say yes!” the crowd started chanting in English. For some strange reason, they were using a foreign language to demand a response.

“What’s it matter? Just go out with him!” someone jeered irresponsibly.

“Go out with me, too!” another added opportunistically.

Ignoring the bystanders, the girl bowed her head deeply.

“I’m sorry, but no!”

It was a decisive rejection. Just those few words would have sufficed, but she doubled down, saying, “You’re not my type at all!” It was merciless, as if she’d kept hitting him when he was already down.

“Seriously?” asked the guy who’d been rejected, unable to believe what he was hearing.

“Seriously,” she answered timidly.

The room erupted into noise once again, and the applause resumed.

Everyone was clapping and laughing—even Narumi sitting next to me.

“You’re such a spoilsport, Sorano,” he said, hitting me on the back.

“I’ve never liked people who try to stand out,” I told him.

“Why not? It’s funny!”

“I guess I just hate how desperate they are. You know, like they’re trying too hard.”

“Maybe they’re just tryin’ to reinvent themselves in college. That’s what this place is for, right?”

“Even so, I don’t like it when people try to make waves. Personally, I don’t even want to cause the tiniest ripple.”

I felt that way with all my heart.

Being impressive or memorable required a certain amount of effort. It was easier to stay below the radar.

I always made sure nothing I said was so strange it was off-putting, and I tried to read the room in order to fit in.

But I hated taking the initiative socially.

“If you hadn’t invited me today, I wouldn’t have shown up.”

As soon as I blurted out my true feelings, I regretted it.

I never usually said things like that.

Was I really so annoyed? I hadn't meant to say that…

My regret appeared unnecessary, though. The large, laid-back man next to me made a completely unrelated suggestion.

"Hey, let's go over there for a bit."

He was looking at the table where the girl who'd just rejected the momentous confession was sitting.

Seriously? I thought, stumped.

Most of the tables were swarmed by guys, creating small colonies around the women there—yet no one seemed interested in the girls at Hayase's table.

It made no sense. Even from a distance, they didn't seem unattractive. In fact, they looked like the best-looking group around.

It was no surprise that Hayase had been asked out, and the girl sitting next to her was so beautiful she could be mistaken for a fashion model.

Everyone there was seeking out the opposite sex like zombies searching for flesh, but no one was paying any notice to these beautiful girls.

What was going on…? It was as if that one table was in a parallel universe.

I could understand why guys would be reluctant to approach such high-class women. There was a chance they wouldn't even give you the time of day, and their personalities could be complete minefields. Either way, my instincts were telling me to stay away.

Narumi, however, felt differently.

"C'mon, let's go," he said, casually grabbing my arm and standing up.

"Wait!" I protested, but it was futile.

"Ya mind if we sit here?" Narumi asked.

He sat down opposite the girls, forcing me to take the seat next to him.

Hayase looked visibly wary.

The would-be model, on the other hand, seemed more welcoming.

"Hello!" she said.

"I'm Ushio Narumi. And this's—"

"Kakeru Sorano," I said with a quick bob of the head.

Hayase sighed, as though she'd been backed into a corner.

"I'm Yuuko Hayase. And this is…"

"Koharu Fuyutsuki."

The girl in front of me—Koharu Fuyutsuki—gave us a gentle smile. For some reason, though, I found it off-putting.

It was because she was so pretty.

Before she'd opened her mouth, Fuyutsuki had looked like a true beauty, but when she smiled and her eyes narrowed, she seemed cuter.

Her face was small, her eyes were big and bright, and her long hair shone under the lights. Her tone of voice was calm and sweet, completely changing the impression I'd had of her. Rather than a model, she almost looked like an idol.

It was as if she was from a different dimension. Like there was no way the two of us lived on the same planet.

She was so beautiful it freaked me out. That was a first for me.

However, there was one thing about Fuyutsuki that I found a little odd.

She just kept staring straight ahead.

Curious as to what she was looking at, I followed her gaze—but there was nothing but a blank wall behind me.

I wondered if there was something *on* the wall, but no matter how hard I looked, I couldn't spot anything. I found myself under some sort of strange illusion that if someone as beautiful as her was looking at the wall, then there must be something there. I even started to wonder whether we were in a world-famous building, but I discounted that idea, reminding myself that this was just one of a chain of bars with the same name.

When I shifted my gaze away from the wall and back to Fuyutsuki, I found her feeling around on the table with her right hand. Directly in front of her was a glass filled with orange juice, but she was struggling to pick it up. She looked like she was navigating her way through a dense fog. I couldn't help but wonder what she was doing.

Hayase tapped Fuyutsuki on the shoulder and whispered in her ear.

"It's right in front of you, Koharu."

"Thanks, Yuuko."

Fuyutsuki extended her arm straight out in front of her, gently touching the glass and grabbing hold of it.

As I sat there confused, struggling to work out what the problem was, Narumi casually asked, "Huh? D'ya have bad eyesight, Fuyutsuki?"

I was shocked… How could he ask such a personal question to someone he'd only just met? Fuyutsuki didn't seem bothered by it, though. She put down her glass and smiled sweetly.

"Yeah. I'm blind."

As soon as I stepped out of the bar, the cool breeze brushed against my cheek. My body was still hot from being inside, so it felt good.

There must not have been a ton of oxygen in the room, because even the exhaust-fume-filled air along the highway now seemed refreshing.

The rowdy group we'd been with was probably on their way to an afterparty already. I could hear laughter echoing in the distance—most likely theirs.

As we were leaving, Hayase had leaned in and whispered to me, careful not to let Fuyutsuki hear.

"Those guys switched tables as soon as they found out Koharu couldn't see."

"So that's why your table was like a remote island."

"A *remote island*?" asked Hayase, her eyes wide.

"It was like an island separated from the mainland, don't you think?"

"What are you talking about?" Hayase said, laughing.

Having left the bar we'd been at in Tsukishima, we found ourselves heading down Kiyosumi-dori Avenue toward Monzen-nakacho. Narumi and I were heading to our college dorm across the Aioi Bridge, while Hayase said she was going to catch the subway after dropping Fuyutsuki off.

Fuyutsuki was following the yellow tactile paving using a stick called a white cane.

Hayase walked beside her, keeping a hand on Fuyutsuki's elbow. Narumi, meanwhile, chattered away at the two girls.

The sound of cars drowned out their voices as we walked along the highway. Looking up, I noticed it was a clear moonlit night. There were no stars in sight; the brightness of the moon and the city lights was probably to blame for that. Even so, the scattered lights of the apartment buildings looked like real stars. The huge moon peeked out through high-rise buildings, looking as if it were suspended in a star-filled sky.

So this is what the city looks like at night, I thought—but then something else struck me.

Fuyutsuki wouldn't be able to see the moon, would she?

She's blind.

What would *I* do if I lost my sight? Probably shut myself in my room, cursing my fate with every fiber of my being. It wouldn't surprise me if I lost all hope. I'd feel guilty burdening other people whenever I had to eat or take a walk. I can't even imagine how hard it would be. There was no way I'd act as cheerfully as Fuyutsuki did.

Why had she decided to come to the freshman party even though she couldn't see? Narumi had asked her that during the event, which shocked me. He never sugarcoated things, but Fuyutsuki hadn't seemed to mind.

“You came because it was a new experience, huh…?”

As I was mulling over her words, I heard a voice beside me speak up.

“What was that?”

“Gah!” I accidentally blurted out.

Hayase was looking at me, blinking in confusion.

“Huh? Do you hate me or something?” she asked.

“Of course not,” I told her.

“I’m just kidding.”

Hayase sulked for a moment but then immediately let out a giggle. The four of us had spent the entire end of the party chatting together, and the wariness she’d initially displayed seemed to have evaporated.

“Is it okay for you not to hold her hand?” I asked Hayase.

Fuyutsuki was walking along the yellow tiles unaided, forging straight ahead.

“As long as there’s nothing on the tactile paving blocking her way, she’s fine walking alone. She doesn’t like people touching her when she hasn’t asked for help,” Hayase explained.

“Are you two old friends?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I mean, you’re acting as her chaperone. I kind of figured that was the case.”

“Oh, that’s what you mean. I only met Koharu at the entrance ceremony. I’m Hayase and she’s Fuyutsuki, so we’re *Fu* and *Ha*, right?”

For a moment, I felt like Hayase was speaking in riddles. Students are put in alphabetical order for entrance ceremonies, though, so she must have meant they were seated together.

“…I see.”

“Hey, did you know our university has something called student guides? They’re advertising for applicants on the bulletin boards.”

“I hadn’t heard about that.”

“Yeah, I figured as much. Student guides are volunteers who assist disabled people during their college years.”

From what Hayase told me, the role involved accompanying the student to classes, helping them move around campus, and assisting them at mealtimes, depending on the needs of the individual. Hayase was such an admirable person. But even so, I felt like it was in my best interests to keep my distance. Apparently, Fuyutsuki had mentioned wanting to go to the party tonight, so Hayase had come along with her. She seemed like the type of person who did that sort of thing often, too. I knew people like her existed, but they were rare—

and the total opposite of me.

“I have a bad habit of trying to help at the drop of a hat, but as a general rule, it’s best not to interfere unless the person explicitly asks you to.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah. Otherwise, it’s like you’re saying they can’t do it by themselves,” Hayase said, looking down at the ground.

That did make sense. It would probably suck to have someone meddle in everything you did, treating you like a child.

“She told me she wanted to try going to a party while she was at college,” Hayase said softly. “Pretty amazing, right?”

There was a hint of pity in her voice.

“Oh yeah!” she suddenly exclaimed, lifting her head in an exaggerated manner. “You’re in the same department as me, right, Sorano?”

“You study logistics, too?” I asked Hayase.

“Yep. So does Koharu.”

“Whoa. Narumi’s the only one who’s studying something different, then.”

“Do you take computer science?” she asked.

“The one first period on Mondays? Well, yeah…”

“I don’t.”

“I’m regretting signing up for those lectures… I don’t understand a thing,” I admitted.

“Koharu said that, too.”

“We’re in the same class?”

Now that I thought about it, there might have been someone who looked like Fuyutsuki sitting in the back. I tried to remember but couldn’t, probably because I hadn’t been all that interested.

As I was pretending to rack my brain, Hayase came out with a sudden suggestion.

“Are you interested in becoming a student guide, Sorano?”

Dark clouds formed over our conversation. I didn’t like the way this was going.

“Why?” I asked, subtly trying to reject her idea.

“My schedule and Koharu’s don’t overlap. I was hoping you could help us out, even if it’s just during that one lecture.”

“Well, the thing is—”

“You only have to help her if she looks like she’s struggling, okay?”

Hayase was being very forward—pushy, even. I actually found it pretty

amazing.

As I was reeling from the mild shock, I heard a crash ahead of us.

A bike had fallen over, and it seemed to have startled Fuyutsuki.

It looked like she'd accidentally knocked it over with her white cane on the tactile paving, where it had been parked.

"Are you okay?" asked Hayase, rushing over.

"Sorry 'bout that. I didn't notice it was there," said Narumi.

I almost took a step forward, but I stopped when I saw Narumi pick the fallen bicycle up off the ground.

"I'm sorry!" Fuyutsuki said.

All I did was stand frozen to the spot, watching her.

"It's fine, seriously. Anyone coulda knocked over this junky old thing."

Was its stand broken or something? Narumi was struggling to get the rusty bike to stay upright.

Hayase came back over, frowning.

"Lately, I've become much more mindful not to park my bike on the tactile paving," she said. "More people need to know how important it is."

"Yeah," I responded almost automatically.

"Yeah!" Hayase repeated, slightly irritated.

Then, maintaining that same level of annoyance, she returned to our previous topic of conversation.

"So what do you think about the student guide idea?"

I'd hoped the incident with the knocked-over bicycle would have put the issue out of her mind, but unfortunately for me, it hadn't.

"Hmm." I pretended to think things over for a moment. "Give me some time to consider it," I replied vaguely.

I meant it as another indirect refusal, but Hayase wasn't going to back down.

"Give me your contact info," she demanded, showing me a QR code to add her on the LINE messaging app. I reluctantly swapped IDs with Hayase. As soon as that was done, she smiled and said, "Make sure you help Koharu out whenever she needs anything," and rushed back over to Fuyutsuki.

This was bad.

"But—"

I almost said "I'm terrible at that kind of stuff," but I stopped myself at the last moment.

When I was a young kid, I'd moved around a lot, from one home to another.

Apparently, that was the only way my divorced single mother had been able

to bring up a child.

We'd started out at my grandparents' place, but when they got sick, we ended up at my aunt's instead. Then, after my aunt and my mom had a fight, we'd had to go and live with a distant relative. At one point, a friend of Mom's took us in, even though we weren't related.

Wherever I went, people hated me for being "too arrogant." When I'd tried to act courteously, they'd hated me for being "too polite." Standing out was a surefire way to be disliked at every new school I transferred to—but no one said anything when I tried my hardest to keep to myself. At the end of the day, everyone likes the innocuous types.

I eventually learned that blending in and staying away from people was the best approach. Before I knew it, I became a pro at reading people's facial expressions, staying under the radar, and identifying safe zones.

I looked up to find the moon obscured by fog.

I could only make out its vague outline. The dull moonlight gave the throng of apartment buildings a mysterious glow. I found it a beautiful sight, but the cold, inorganic nature of the concrete caught my eye, making me feel a bit uneasy.

"Oh, it's this building, right?" said Hayase, coming to a stop.

We were at one end of the Aioi Bridge. The university was just across the other side.

"What a nice place!" exclaimed Narumi, looking up at the apartment complex.

In front of us stood two buildings, each around fifty stories high. They looked like your typical high-rise apartment blocks. There was a short staircase and wheelchair ramp that led to a long promenade, and at the end of it was the entrance adorned by a waterfall flowing down a large pane of glass. It was immediately obvious that these were luxury apartments. Fuyutsuki gave off neat and clean vibes, but this confirmed my impression that she was a pristine rich girl.

Hayase guided Fuyutsuki's hand toward the railing of the wheelchair ramp. She tapped the tactile paving with her white cane and bowed politely.

"Thank you."

"Have a good night."

"See ya."

"Good night."

We exchanged good-byes and waved to one another.

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That was when it happened.

We heard the *boom* of something exploding, and red light reflected in the windows of the apartment building.

Boom, boom. The explosions continued, one after another. Each time the sound cut through the night sky, the building's windows were dyed in vivid color—yellow, blue, then red again.

Narumi pointed to the other side of the Aioi Bridge.

"Looks like they're over there."

Hayase walked from the ramp back to the sidewalk, then looked up at the sky.

"Isn't that the university? Are they allowed to let off fireworks there?"

"Wait, what? Fireworks?" said Fuyutsuki excitedly.

She must have wished she could see them for herself, because she came running down the ramp, guided by the rail. Suddenly, her hand slipped, and she lost her balance.

"Watch out!" I cried, instinctively catching her.

I helped Fuyutsuki get her feet back under her again. When I touched her palm, it felt cool against my hand.

"Your hands are so warm, Sorano," she said, seeming totally unperturbed.

"You could have hurt yourself," I told her.

"Sorry."

"No, it's fine."

By the time I'd helped her to the sidewalk, the fireworks had already ended.

"We missed them, didn't we?" she asked with a playful smile.

"Can you see them?" I asked, finding her reaction a little odd.

"No," she replied, turning her face toward me. "But I love fireworks."

"You do?"

Even though you can't see them?

I kept that question to myself, though.

"One day, I want to set off fireworks with friends," she said, beaming.

Fuyutsuki couldn't see the world around her, so how could she enjoy fireworks?

She would be alone, surrounded by pitch-black darkness.

All alone, listening to the explosions echoing around her.

So why, then, did she sound so happy talking about them?

Was she pretending, or was it genuine?

She was such a mystery to me.

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“Sorano,” Hayase whispered in my ear. “Koharu’s cute, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, sure,” I replied ambiguously. I knew it’d be bad to say no.

“She’s cute, *and* she’s cool.”

Hayase kept nagging me until we eventually parted ways. She said things like “You only have to help out when you feel like it,” and on several occasions, the words *I can’t* almost escaped my lips.

The best policy was to ignore her.

So that’s what I did—just let it go past.

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2. The Terrace

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*

You don't see it that often nowadays, but our college dorm had shared rooms. It was probably a vestige of the establishment's long history.

Understandably, I hadn't been thrilled about having to share a room.

However, there was one advantage I couldn't ignore: It was cheap.

My rent was ten thousand yen per month—shockingly cheap for Tokyo.

There was no way I could have resisted such a bargain.

The roommate each person ended up with was a total lottery, and once you were put together in your freshman year, you'd stay together until one of you moved out. It seemed like it was common for roommates to live together for all four years.

While Narumi could be pushy, I knew he was a good guy deep down. He'd wake me up when I looked like I was going to oversleep, and I'd started to appreciate having him around.

"Don'cha have class first period, Sorano? You stayed up late again, yeah?" he said, offering me some instant miso soup as soon as I woke up.

Still groggy, I took it off him. I took a sip and sighed with relief.

"Hang on, are you my mom or something?"

Recently, I'd felt like Narumi's Kansai sense of humor had started rubbing off on me.

*

First period on a Monday was always a challenge—but sleeping through the entire weekend made Mondays especially hard to face.

The freshman party on Friday had drained me mentally, so I'd spent the entirety of Saturday and Sunday in bed. Having to face an 8:50 AM lecture with a mind that unfocused was basically torture.

As that thought went through my mind, I yawned and breathed in the cool late-April air.

I left the dorm and walked across the road at a short crosswalk. My university, situated directly in front of our building, was just a one-minute walk

away.

There's a dense thicket of trees right where you enter the school through the back gate. It's cool beneath them, and the air is filled with the smell of soil and the chirping of birds. This invigorating atmosphere cheered me up, and I took bigger strides as I made my way to the large lecture hall.

The spacious hall, which could hold a hundred people, was abuzz with chatter. There were short staircases on either side of the entrance, and I walked up one and turned to face the front of the hall, where the blackboard was situated. All of the classroom's seating sloped down toward it.

I didn't say hello to anyone, nor did anyone say hello to me.

I made my way to my usual seat, trying to stay out of people's eyesight. We didn't have assigned seating, but after attending class for a month, everyone pretty much had a go-to spot.

Today, though, someone had taken mine. I reluctantly looked for another place to sit, and I eventually found a free seat at the very back.

Once I'd made my way there, I noticed Fuyutsuki sitting at the opposite end of a long desk.

I was surprised, but of course, I didn't say hello.

I took out my phone, only to discover I'd gotten a message on LINE. It was from Hayase.

I looked at it from the app's main page so it wouldn't get marked as read.

Yuuko: Take care of Koharu for me!

She was unbelievable. At this point, I could only applaud her brazenness.

Hayase and Fuyutsuki had only met at the entrance ceremony, which meant they hadn't even known each other for a month.

It shocked me that Hayase was willing to meddle in other people's lives this much for the sake of someone she'd only known for a few weeks. Did she just have a really strong sense of justice or something?

When I looked over at Fuyutsuki, I noticed she was gently running her fingers over a book. The book was completely white—the front cover, the pages, everything. It didn't look like there was any black lettering printed on it at all. She kept a yellow plastic bookmark nestled in between the pages as she turned them, then took out the bookmark and started to stroke the blank pages again with her fingertips. When I looked closer, I saw that the pages had raised bumps on them; it must have been braille.

The morning sunlight streaming into the classroom gave Fuyutsuki a luminous glow.

As I watched her, the hustle and bustle of the lecture hall began to die down.

What was she reading?

What kind of book was it?

I was curious, but I couldn't work up the courage to ask. This left me with no option but to sneak a glance at the title—but even that was in braille. I had no way of reading what it said.

Whatever. I decided to pretend I hadn't seen her.

It turned out, though, that I couldn't stick with that plan for long.

Fuyutsuki attempted to insert the bookmark between the pages behind the one she was reading, but it bounced off the edge of the book and slid in my direction.

She didn't seem to notice.

I picked it up and glanced at her as if to say *Is this yours?* but of course, there was no way for her to know that. I tried sliding the bookmark back to her, but even then, she still didn't notice it was there.

I pondered over what to do next; however, it didn't take long for me to realize that I had no other options, so I psyched myself up.

"Good morning," I said to her.

It had taken me a lot of courage to get these words out, but she didn't reply.

Fuyutsuki continued silently reading her book.

"Good morning," I repeated.

"Hmm?" she said in a startled, high-pitched voice.

I was a little flustered on my end as well, but I gradually began to grasp the problem.

Oh yeah. She can't tell which way I'm facing or whether I'm looking at her.

"Good morning, Fuyutsuki," I said.

This time, I addressed her clearly by name. She turned around, looking vaguely in my direction.

"Sorano?" she said. It looked more like she was turning her ear toward me, rather than her face.

"What's with the questioning tone?" I asked.

"I'm sorry. I can't tell for sure unless you say your name."

Oh, right. Since she can't see, it must be hard to tell who a voice belongs to.

"Just now, I figured it out by your tone," she explained.

"My tone?"

“Yeah. Your voice is a little bit higher pitched.”

“It is?”

“Mm-hmm. Most people are closer to a ‘do,’ but you’re more of a ‘mi.’”

“So you must have perfect pitch.”

“I’ve been playing piano since I was a kid.”

She mimicked playing a piano, and her cheerful reaction gave me a sense of relief.

When I looked closely at her fingers, I could see they were long and thin. She really was beautiful. I don’t know why that came as such a surprise to me, but for some reason, it did.

I asked whether “that bookmark” belonged to her, and a bewildered look appeared on her face.

Right. She can’t see it.

I picked up the bookmark and had Fuyutsuki gently touch it with her fingertips. She seemed to figure out what had happened.

“Did you pick it up for me? You’re so nice, Sorano,” she said, smiling.

Her unexpected smile made my heart race. I didn’t want to dwell on that feeling, though, so I turned away. Before long, the professor arrived, and the lecture began.

My degree was part of the Humanities Department, but for some reason, we had a course on computer architecture and processing. As someone who’d fled to humanities because I couldn’t even fully grasp the decimal system, the binary system was far beyond my comprehension. Bits turning into bytes and storing addresses in memory space—it all sounded like nonsense to me.

College lectures generally tend to leave students to their own devices. The idea is that if you want to understand something, you need to research it yourself. I could see why they’d want to encourage us to be independent, but this was beyond sadistic.

The ninety-minute class dragged on and on.

I took a look at my phone; it had only been forty minutes. If this was a high school class, we’d have just ten minutes to go.

Unable to concentrate any longer, I gazed out the window. The sight of the clear blue sky stretching on and on lifted my spirits somewhat.

When I looked back down, I spotted Fuyutsuki staring straight ahead with a serious expression. She had a pair of earphones connected to a small device with a keyboard. One earphone was in her ear, while she seemed to be using the other to try to pick up the lecture.

I looked up the device on my phone. Apparently, it was a braille note-taker. As the name suggested, it was a device that took notes in braille, just like you would by writing it down.

Once the long ninety minutes finally ended, the professor left the room, and raucous chatter filled the space. My next lecture wasn't until third period, so with second period and the lunch break, I had almost three hours free. Every week, I used this time to go back to the dorm and sleep. Planning to do the same today, I got to my feet.

I glanced at Fuyutsuki, who was tidying away the things on her table. She placed the items inside her bag one by one, meticulously checking that each one was actually in there. Every single movement she made took time. Stuffing things into her bag at random probably wasn't an option for her.

It looked like a struggle.

I couldn't help but think that.

I hated myself for thinking it.

And I hated myself for noticing these things and being upset by them.

…*I should get home.*

But just as I turned my back to her, I heard a clattering sound.

I looked behind me. Fuyutsuki had knocked over her white cane, which had been propped up against a chair. It slid down the stairs, coming to a stop at the bottom of the first flight.

Fuyutsuki crouched down, feeling around on the floor, slowly searching for her white cane. But she wasn't going to find it.

That much was obvious. If I was told to close my eyes and look for something, I wouldn't be able to find it, either.

I looked around, but Fuyutsuki and I were the only ones left inside the classroom.

This whole situation sucked.

I hated how I faltered for a moment in times like these.

I waited for someone else to step up, which made me feel like such a lowlife.

On one hand, it was a relief that no one else was around. This kind of situation made me worry about other people's opinions, which disgusted me even more. If Hayase or Narumi were around, they would have gone to pick up her cane without a second thought. It was so easy to imagine them doing it.

"Fuyutsuki, wait. I'll pick it up for you."

"Thank you so much."

"Got it."

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“Seriously, thank you.”

All I’d done was pick up something she’d dropped. Did she really need to act so grateful?

“It’s no big deal,” I assured her.

“I should have attached a bell to it.”

“Nah. Once it had fallen over, it wouldn’t make a sound anyway.”

“Oh… You’re right. Ah-ha-ha.”

When she laughed like that, Fuyutsuki looked like any normal girl. Yet when I saw her walking with her white cane again, I couldn’t help but think about her eyesight.

“Do you have a class during second period?” she asked me.

“No, nothing.”

“Do you have any plans?”

The elevator doors opened, and I waited for Fuyutsuki to step inside. Once we were both in, I pressed the button.

My plan was to go home and sleep, but I couldn’t bring myself to admit that. It felt like I’d missed my window of opportunity to leave. At this point, you couldn’t just say, “I’m going to head home.”

“Wanna kill some time together?” Fuyutsuki asked. “Yuuko just got in touch to tell me she’s busy.”

“She called you?”

“No. She messaged me on LINE.”

“Oh, you can use LINE?”

I was surprised, but Fuyutsuki just giggled.

She told me she’d give me her ID later on, and we headed to the student center together.

The center had a terraced area with a row of vending machines and an iron fence, presumably there to offer some privacy or to provide shade. The fence diffused the sunlight, creating a softly lit, pleasant-looking spot.

“Do you want something to drink?” I asked, standing in front of a vending machine. It was the type where you put in a paper cup, and the machine filled it up with whatever you chose.

“I can buy it myself,” Fuyutsuki replied.

She figured out which coins to put into the machine using touch alone, then pressed the buttons for milk tea with extra sugar as though she’d done it a million times before.

“How’d you do that?”

“Hee-hee. You’re curious?”

“I mean, you can’t see.”

“This is *my* vending machine.”

“…You’re not, like, in the vending machine business or something, are you?”

Had her family become vending machine tycoons and bought her that luxury apartment with the earnings?

Fuyutsuki froze for a moment, then burst out laughing.

“No, of course not.”

“But you said this vending machine was *yours*,” I continued politely.

“So you *do* tell jokes, after all.”

“Wait, did you think I was some kind of grouch who never told jokes?”

Something must have set her off, because Fuyutsuki couldn’t stop laughing.

“A grouch. Ah-ha-ha. Ha-ha-ha.”

Fuyutsuki gently wiped away her tears with a finger. There was a certain sophistication to every single movement she made.

“When I say ‘my vending machine,’ I mean it’s one I regularly use. For people like me, using vending machines we’re not familiar with is like playing a game of Russian roulette. You want milk tea, but you end up with sweet red bean soup instead!”

“Sounds kind of fun,” I replied, but then immediately apologized. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No need to apologize,” said Fuyutsuki. “It can be fun sometimes, but if I use a different machine *every* time, I’ll never be able to get the drink I want. So I pick a vending machine to use regularly. That’s why I call this—”

“*Your* vending machine,” I interjected.

“Exactly.” Fuyutsuki grinned. “Yuuko told me what all the buttons were for the other day, so that’s how I mastered it.”

“You memorized *all* the buttons?”

“Sorry, no. Just the ones for sugar and milk tea.”

“Why exaggerate, then?”

“It was just a figure of speech.”

She turned in my direction when I spoke to her, and our conversations were incredibly natural—so much so that I almost forgot she couldn’t see. Even when we were face-to-face, though, our eyes never met, which served as a reminder that Fuyutsuki really was blind.

“Come to think of it, how do you use LINE?” I asked.

Fuyutsuki gently placed her cup of milk tea on the table and took out her

phone to explain it to me. Apparently, most smartphones came with a screen reader feature. When that function was on, it'd read out any text you tapped on. You had to double-tap when you wanted to select something.

Fuyutsuki enthusiastically explained how it worked.

"It's hard to operate a phone like this. Different things happen depending on whether you use two fingers or three."

"Oh, wow. That sounds tough."

"There are other commands for sliding four fingers across the screen and tapping it three times as well, so it takes a lot of practice to get used to. It was a challenge, but people really can do anything when they have no other choice."

Fuyutsuki talked about her struggles excitedly, as if she didn't consider them to be struggles at all.

"How do you write messages on LINE and stuff?"

"I use speech-to-text. It makes mistakes sometimes, though, so bear with me," she said with a cheerful smile. It almost felt like her happiness knew no bounds.

"Narumi asked me for my LINE the other day, too," she added.

True enough, I could see his profile pic on her phone screen.

Then, still smiling, Fuyutsuki said something that sent a chill through me.

"Believe it or not, we visually disabled people do the same things as everyone else."

I didn't know how to react to her openly calling herself "disabled." There were plenty of other ways she could have expressed herself—"visually impaired," "handicapped"—but she'd chosen to refer to herself as "disabled." She'd said it so openly, too. As if it was no big deal.

I couldn't imagine myself admitting I was from a single-parent family so cheerfully. After all, it was something that still cast a shadow over my heart.

How much had Fuyutsuki gone through to reach this point?

When I tried to imagine it, I started thinking that it might be rude to be asking her questions like "How do you do that?" and "Can you do this?"

I wasn't sure anymore.

What was it okay for me to ask about?

What sort of things would hurt her feelings?

How should I treat her? Just like anyone else?

What did that even mean in the first place?

I could feel a transparent wall between us.

An invisible barrier of my own making.

I knew the answers to all my doubts.

I needed to properly listen to her, properly talk to her.

I understood that. Or at least, I thought I had.

“Give me yours, too, Sorano,” Fuyutsuki suddenly said.

For a moment, I wasn’t sure what she was asking me for.

I could see a QR code up on her phone screen; she was asking me to exchange contact information with her. My brain slowly tried to catch up, but the only sound that came out of my mouth was “Oh, uh, um.”

“Can you scan it, Sorano?” she continued unhurriedly.

I scanned the code. Fuyutsuki’s profile pic appeared on my phone screen, along with the name *Koharu*.

Her profile pic was a picture of a flower I’d never seen before.

*

It happened after first period the following Monday.

Fuyutsuki had dropped her white cane again. I hoped someone else would notice, but they didn’t, and it felt kind of wrong to just leave it there.

“Are you okay?” I asked, approaching her.

“Thank you for helping me out again,” she said. Her smile looked pretty bashful, considering she was just thanking me.

After I approached her, we’d ended up doing the same thing we had the week before: killing time on the student center’s terrace. Fuyutsuki drank her sugary milk tea one tiny sip at a time. We began to make small talk, but we both seemed to realize there was no need to try to force the conversation, so it petered out naturally.

I didn’t mind the quiet. Judging by Fuyutsuki’s expression, she didn’t seem to find it uncomfortable, either, so we both just relaxed and spaced out for a while.

There was a gentle breeze, and I could hear the nearby trees rustling. The pleasant sunlight made me yawn—but I stifled it, not wanting to make a noise.

That was when a voice called out “Hey!”

Hayase was waving and walking toward us.

“Oh, it’s Yuuko,” Fuyutsuki remarked, turning to face the direction of the sound.

“You recognized her by her voice alone?”

I was impressed. I doubt I would have been able to figure out who it was with

my eyes closed.

"Yuuko has a cute voice, so it's easy to recognize."

"I see."

I'd heard that when someone lost their sight, their other senses became more acute. I wondered whether that was true.

I wanted to ask Fuyutsuki, but I didn't want to interrogate her. It also felt like a bit of a rude question.

As soon as Hayase came over, she slumped her shoulders dejectedly.

"My second-period class was canceled because the professor couldn't make it. What were you two talking about?"

I was about to say "Nothing much," but Fuyutsuki answered before I had the chance.

"We were talking about how your voice is easy to recognize from a distance."

"Huh? Really?"

Hayase sat down between us. She turned her back to me and faced Fuyutsuki.

"So does losing your sight really make your hearing better?"

That was the exact question I'd been so reluctant to ask, but Hayase made it sound like it was no big deal. I couldn't help but think how bold she was.

"Oh no. I don't think so," Fuyutsuki replied.

"I've heard some people can use echoes to figure out where things are, by distinguishing the different sounds…"

"I definitely can't do that."

Fuyutsuki smiled and waved a hand in front of her face.

"Well, I have played the piano for a long time, so I guess I *can* tell some sounds apart."

"Oh, that's right; you play piano, Koharu. In that case, there's something I want you to do for me…"

Hayase and Fuyutsuki continued to chat amiably while I looked up at the sky. As I watched the clouds slowly streaming past, I started fantasizing about how good it would feel to lie down on one of them.

In other words, the gentle sunlight was making me overwhelmingly sleepy.

I glanced at Hayase and Fuyutsuki out of the corner of my eye. They were enjoying their conversation, and a light bulb suddenly went off in my head.

This might be my chance to head home…

"Well, I guess it's time for me to head back to my dorm," I said, attempting to casually slip away. I was desperate to go home and loaf around.

However, my attempt to leave was completely thwarted.

"Oh, can you show us where the Memorial Hall is on your way there?" Hayase asked me.

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Show you where *what* is?"

"We were just talking about it," Hayase said, her eyebrows arching. "We need to use the piano in the Memorial Hall for the school festival's jazz concert. It's located on the grounds of your dorm. Since I'm on the festival committee, I need to make sure it's working properly, and Koharu said she'd check it to make sure it's not making any weird sounds."

I'd had no idea Hayase was on the committee for the school festival.

"…So why do you want *me* to take you there?" I asked candidly.

Hayase looked startled.

"You're heading back to your dorm anyway, aren't you?" she replied.

Since when did "I'm going back to my dorm" and "I'll take you there" mean the same thing?

"The dorm grounds have those 'No Unauthorized Entry' signs up, so you're only really allowed to go in if you're a resident, right?" Hayase explained. "Come on, please?"

I figured I'd draw negative attention to myself if I said no, so I reluctantly complied.

"I guess it's on my way back anyway."

I was going to take a nap once I got home. I'd still be able to get a good two hours of sleep in.

With my mind already on going to bed, I walked out the back gate with the two girls, heading toward the dorm grounds.

At that moment, however, Hayase received a call. Judging by her reaction, it was probably from an upperclassman.

Following the brief telephone conversation—during which Hayase's responses had been limited to "Yes" and "Of course"—she told us that she had to go back to campus.

"Sorry. I have a festival committee meeting to go to."

Right before leaving, Hayase took Fuyutsuki by the hand.

"Can you check that piano for me, Koharu?" she asked, then gave me a cheerful wave. "Look after her for me, Sorano!"

Deep down, I wanted to fight back, but I knew rebuffing Hayase's request at this point would make me look socially inept. I stifled a sigh, and Fuyutsuki and

I started making our way to our destination.

I gave Fuyutsuki directions as I guided her to the Memorial Hall where the piano was kept, saying things like “There’s a step here,” “We’re about to turn right,” and “There’s a staircase in front of us.” Fuyutsuki used her white cane to identify obstacles as she walked.

Was it okay not to offer her my hand while we were walking together? It felt like that’d be the safer option, but I was reluctant to touch her.

We found the piano in a big, eerily quiet room inside the Memorial Hall. Sunlight illuminated the dust particles floating in the air, making the whole room sparkle.

The large grand piano was sitting in a corner by itself, its shiny black surface covered in a thin layer of dust.

I led Fuyutsuki over to the keys. She ran her fingers over them.

“Wow!” she exclaimed with childlike wonder.

“Do you need help sitting down?” I asked.

“Thanks, but I’ll be fine.”

She sat down on the piano bench. I watched from right beside her as she pressed a key with her index finger.

“I know it’s a weird question to ask at this point, but how can you play piano if you’re blind?”

“I can only play songs I memorized back when I was able to see.”

“Oh. I guess there *are* blind pianists, after all.”

“Those people are on another level. I wouldn’t be able to learn a new composition without seeing it.”

Fuyutsuki giggled.

“A lot of my memories and habits from when I was able to see have stayed with me. I still glance at the spot where the sheet music would be while I’m playing, and I turn to look at people when they speak to me. When there are fireworks, I can’t help but look up, so sometimes, people think I’m able to see. I can still visualize what things look like, which makes me grateful that I was able to see at one point.”

The fact that Fuyutsuki was able to say how grateful she was that she’d been able to see—despite having lost her sight—left me speechless.

Would it be appropriate to say “That’s great”? Or would she think I was unfairly assuming most people wouldn’t be that positive?

I froze, unsure how to respond—but then a sharp, high-pitched sound brought me back to my senses.

“Oh, it’s a grand piano,” Fuyutsuki remarked.

“You can tell?”

“It feels totally different. The keys come back up much faster.”

“Whoa.”

“It makes me nervous knowing that you’re listening,” Fuyutsuki said, before playing a few chords to test the piano out. It looked like this was second nature to her. Then she adjusted her posture and the position of her seat.

“All right. Is it okay if I start playing?”

“Sure.”

Fuyutsuki placed her long fingers on the keys and took in a deep breath. As she exhaled, she slowly applied pressure.

A gentle melody began to fill the silent room.

Fuyutsuki’s fingers caressed the keys, producing a rich sound.

I was amazed at how talented she was. The piece of music she was playing made me think of the ocean.

I could feel the waves gently lapping at my feet, soaking up to my ankles in the water as the blue sky stretched out above me. I could see the surface of the ocean glistening in the distance, and I spotted seabirds flying around. These thoughts flickered across my mind as I gazed absentmindedly out to sea, and white-crested waves suddenly swept onto the shore, the foam shimmering brightly around my feet.

At least, that was the way her serene performance made me feel.

“How was it?” Fuyutsuki asked me once she’d finished her song.

What was I supposed to say to that…?

“Mm. I really do love Bach,” I replied offhandedly.

Fuyutsuki burst out laughing, her mouth wide open.

“Sorry, but that wasn’t Bach.”

“Mozart?”

“Ooh, you’re so…so wrong.”

“It’s got to be Chopin, then!”

Fuyutsuki laughed again.

“You really crack me up, Sorano. It’s a piece called ‘Arabesque of Waves’ by Akira Miyoshi.”

“How am I supposed to know that?”

Most people who haven’t studied classical music only know composers whose pictures are displayed in school music rooms—Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Chopin, and the like.

“It’s a song that’s often picked for piano competitions. I played it, too, when I was in fifth grade, and I’ve loved it ever since. I like to play it at a slower tempo than the sheet music suggests, though.”

“Honestly, I thought you were really, really good.”

I praised Fuyutsuki, surprised that an elementary school student would be able to play a piece like that. She thanked me and gave a satisfied smile. Then she cheerfully asked whether I minded if she played a little more.

“Go ahead,” I said, and Fuyutsuki continued playing for the next thirty minutes.

“The piano might require a bit of tuning, but I think it’s good enough,” Fuyutsuki said buoyantly. She was walking next to me, having played to her heart’s content.

“Do you play often?” I asked her.

“Just this electric keyboard I have at home. I play that all the time.”

I didn’t have enough time to get a nap in anymore, so we’d decided to head back to campus and grab something to eat at the cafeteria. We left the grounds of the dormitory and waited for the light to change at the crosswalk near the back entrance.

“Thank you,” Fuyutsuki said.

“No worries.”

“I’m not just talking about the piano,” she continued. “When my cane fell over earlier, I tried to pick it up, wondering why I hadn’t attached a bell to it yet—but in the back of my mind, I had the feeling you’d get it for me. And you did! I was so happy.”

This unexpected confession caught me totally off guard.

“But there was no guarantee I’d pick it up…right?”

“No, but you did!” Fuyutsuki was beaming. “You were called on during the lecture, so I knew you were there. I was hoping we might be able to have tea out on the terrace again, but calling out your name in the lecture hall would have been so embarrassing. I’m really glad we got to talk to each other again.”

“You have my LINE now, so you can just message me. You don’t have to call my name out in the classroom.”

Fuyutsuki’s sudden broad smile and her comment about how happy she was to talk to me again made me feel so embarrassed that I forgot how to sound polite.

“Really? I can?” she asked, surprised.

"…Sure."

"Okay."

For some reason, she was still beaming, and I thought what a strange person she was.

The pedestrian signal turned green, and the sound of a bird chirping came from the crosswalk button.

"Shall we go?" Fuyutsuki asked, hearing the noise.

For some reason, her voice sounded just as chirpy as the bird's.

*

It was the end of May, and about a month had gone by since I first met Fuyutsuki.

We'd made a habit of hanging out on the terrace together whenever we had free time after lectures.

Ever since I'd told her to contact me on LINE, she'd started going out of her way to message me the day before, asking Would you like to have some tea on the terrace? That had made it hard to turn her down.

And so here we were, killing time together on the terrace once again.

I was eating my ramen from the cafeteria, while Fuyutsuki drank her usual sugar-heavy milk tea.

She never ate lunch.

Apparently, she didn't need to after the hearty breakfast her mom made for her every morning.

Fuyutsuki had told me she lived in that apartment block with her mom. There was a hospital she had to visit regularly because of her eyesight, so they'd bought a second home in its vicinity. She'd said the words *second home* so casually that I'd responded with shock.

"I have a real-life millionaire sitting here in front of me."

Fuyutsuki puffed out her cheeks, jokingly mad at me.

Once I'd finished my ramen, I soaked in the sun and spaced out.

There was an early summer breeze in the air, and the blue sky lifted my mood.

"Kakeru?"

"Hmm?"

"I thought you'd disappeared somewhere."

"Oh, right. I guess I went into my shell."

“That was mean of you.”

According to Fuyutsuki, whenever I was quiet and withdrawn for a moment, it seemed as though I’d actually disappeared. Apparently, I was quite unique in the way I could erase my presence.

For some reason, I found I’d grown fond of the way she began our exchanges with “Kakeru?”

I couldn’t remember exactly when it had happened, but one day, Fuyutsuki suddenly asked if we could call each other by our first names.

For me, addressing someone by their last name was the *most* I could manage. Naturally, I declined—but from then on, Fuyutsuki began calling me Kakeru anyway.

In all honesty, I’d never expected to develop this kind of relationship with Fuyutsuki, where we could joke around with each other.

Yet I felt strangely comfortable with her. We must have fit each other’s rhythms or something.

It was the first time in my life I’d had fun talking with a girl.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, what’s that book you’re always reading?”

“This one?” replied Fuyutsuki, getting it out of her bag.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“The title’s written right here on the front,” she said.

“Come on, you know I can’t read braille.”

“It’s *The Diary of Anne Frank*.”

“Oh, no way!”

“Huh?! Have you read it?”

“Nope.”

“What?! What was with that reaction, then?!” Fuyutsuki asked with a laugh.

“Is the book interesting?”

“Seeing how strong-minded and determined she was… It sort of makes me want to try my best, too. There’s this one passage I really like, so I end up reading it over and over again.”

Since I’d never read the book, I didn’t really get what Fuyutsuki was talking about, but seeing how lovingly she caressed the cover told me everything I needed to know.

It must be a really special book. The kind that leaves a lasting impression.

I stared fixedly at the white cover.

“Is it hard to read braille?”

“I’m used to it now, but it takes a bit of time to master. Recently, audiobooks

have become more commonplace, so I listen to those as well. Still, there's nothing quite like running your fingers across the paper."

"Oh yeah?"

"Do you want to give reading braille a go?"

Fuyutsuki passed me the white book. I took it and stroked the bumps with my fingers.

"Whoa."

"That's not an answer."

"Well, just give me some time to think about it."

"I take it that's a no."

Fuyutsuki, who'd seen right through me, laughed again.

"By the way, what's that? I asked.

I picked up the yellow bookmark that was tucked inside the book. It was the same one she'd dropped in that lecture way back when.

"What's *what*?" Fuyutsuki asked, reaching out a hand.

I got her to feel it.

"Oh," she said. "That's a bookmark I made."

There was braille lettering on it.

"What does it say?"

"It's something I'd really like you to read, Kakeru."

"I'll try to figure out what it says when I'm more in the mood."

"Oh, then you'll never get around to it," she said, before murmuring, "You're so funny."

A beat later, she asked a question.

"Do you like setting off fireworks?"

"Why fireworks?"

"I like them."

"I remember you saying that before."

"Did I?"

On the night we'd met, Fuyutsuki had said it was her dream to set off fireworks with friends.

Even though you can't see? I asked myself the same question I had when she'd first told me, but once again, I kept my thoughts to myself.

"I'm from Shimonoseki," I told her. "Well, we moved around a lot, but we ended up there."

The swift currents of Shimonoseki's Kanmon Straits immediately came to mind.

“There’s this festival called the Kanmon Straits Fireworks Festival, where they set off fireworks on either side of the strait. Some are set off in Shimonoseki, while others are set off on Moji Port down in Fukuoka.”

I suddenly remembered going to the fireworks festival with my mom as a little kid.

So I told Fuyutsuki how I’d felt about it.

“It was *super* busy there.”

It was such a straightforward remark that she burst out laughing, slapping the table.

“I thought you were leading up to something good. What sort of comment is that?”

“Seriously, though, the crowds were insane. It’s the second-busiest fireworks festival in the whole of Japan or something.”

“It’s so typical of you to focus on that part,” Fuyutsuki said, still laughing. “I’d love to go there. I bet it’s amazing. They must take turns launching fireworks on either side of the water, one after the other.”

“But it’s *so* busy.”

At that point, Fuyutsuki said something crazy.

“Don’t you think it’s nice how people crowd together to watch fireworks?”

I couldn’t help but let out a “Huh?”

Fuyutsuki exaggeratedly spread out her hands.

“Everyone’s looking up at the night sky, laughing excitedly. You’re surrounded by tons of people, all doing the same thing. When you think about it like that, fireworks are pretty incredible, right?”

“Uhhh…”

I was speechless. Her way of looking at it was so different from mine that it bewildered me.

Fuyutsuki was amazing.

What did the world look like to her?

I was sure this blind girl in front of me saw something completely different from what I did.

Struck by a sort of inferiority complex, I looked down in shame.

Since Fuyutsuki couldn’t see what I was doing, I could sit with my head down for as long as I wanted to. Still, I didn’t want to worry her by bringing the conversation to a sudden end.

“How’d you make this anyway?”

I stroked the bookmark I was looking down at.

“It’s pretty easy if you have the right kind of printer.”

It goes without saying that I wasn’t able to read it. I traced the bumps with my fingers, but there was still no way I could decipher them. In fact, it was hard to tell which parts were raised and which ones weren’t when I was using the ball of my finger. *It’s pretty cool that she can read this*, I thought—but touching the braille lettering reminded me that she was truly blind. I couldn’t help but feel like we lived in different worlds.

“So you can make braille bookmarks. I didn’t know that.”

“I made it after becoming a college student. Have you ever made one of your own? I guess it’s sort of like a bucket list.”

I tried to think of things I wanted to do before I died, but all I could come up with was winning the lottery and spending the rest of my days reading inside my room. That wasn’t really a bucket list item, though—more of a general desire.

“You never know when you’re going to die,” Fuyutsuki said with a grin.

Completely unable to comprehend why she was smiling, I tensed up. That joke was too dark for my tastes.

She must have sensed that, because she tried to smooth things over in a panic.

“I’m sorry. That was a joke. I was joking!”

“Cut it out.”

As soon as I’d wiped the sweat off my palms and put the bookmark back on the table, something terrible happened.

A strong, humid summer wind came gusting toward us.

Some of the chairs on the terrace fell over.

The pages of the book on the table riffled in the breeze, and the bookmark… blew away.

I reached out a hand, but the bookmark slipped right through my grasp.

“Wha…? Huh?!”

The bookmark fluttered away on the wind.

I ran after it, trying to catch it, but the bookmark flew off the terrace and onto the roof of the student association building, disappearing out of sight.

“Huh?”

That was all I could say.

“Wh-what happened?”

Fuyutsuki was shaken up. My panic had rubbed off on her.

I explained the entire ordeal from start to finish.

“I’m sorry. It was important to you, wasn’t it?”

I kept apologizing over and over.

"…Oh well."

Fuyutsuki went quiet, her shoulders visibly slumped.

"It's fine. I remember what was written on it anyway."

She was putting on a brave face, but I still felt kind of guilty.

Maybe that was why I did it.

"Did you know about this?" she began, and I couldn't find it in me to turn down the request that followed.

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"There's a club called the Fireworks Research Society."

Our university has a course for training maritime navigators, so there's a harbor on campus called the Pond that has some small boats anchored to it. According to Fuyutsuki, there was a prefab building next to the first boathouse in front of the Pond that had a fireworks flyer stuck to it. Apparently, this was the clubroom for the Fireworks Research Society. Hayase had been the one to tell her about it.

"Would you mind taking me there? I hate asking Yuuko for help all the time."

"She had a shift at her part-time job this morning, didn't she?"

"Yeah. She'll be busy working in the café right about now."

"A part-time job, huh?"

I wondered whether I should get one myself.

Since my dorm was super cheap, I could get by on my scholarship money alone. It never hurt to have a little extra cash, but I didn't feel like working at all.

"Yuuko's even lovelier when she smells like coffee."

"That does sound kind of cool."

"I want to get a part-time job, too," Fuyutsuki said.

I was surprised, as I figured anyone would be hearing that. It didn't sound like this was some sort of idle dream she had but something she really wanted to do. Her positivity was genuinely impressive.

We left the terrace and started making our way toward the harbor. It didn't take us long to reach the Pond. Despite the NO FISHING sign at the entrance, there were already three people there with their lines in the water. The sea was shimmering, and white clouds slowly drifted overhead.

"This must be the place," I said.

"What's it like?" Fuyutsuki asked.

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I described the prefab building in front of us.

"It's, uh, a sight to behold."

"That doesn't tell me anything," Fuyutsuki retorted with a laugh.

The building looked more like a neglected storage shed.

Green ivy crawled over it. There was one large window, but the curtains were drawn, preventing us from peeking inside. The words *Fireworks Research Society* were messily painted on the door, which also had a faded poster advertising the Sumidagawa Fireworks Festival stuck to it. Metal tubes of various sizes, ranging from about twenty centimeters long to just below knee height, were strewn around the building's exterior.

When I told Fuyutsuki what I could see, her first response was:

"Is this one of your jokes, Kakeru?"

"I'm not joking. I'm telling you exactly what it looks like. There's a good chance this place is some kind of evil lair… What do you want to do? Should I knock on the door?"

"Yes, please."

I swallowed nervously and knocked on the door to the lair.

There was no response, so I tried again.

"Seems like no one's in," I told Fuyutsuki.

"Oh."

We both turned back around—only to be greeted by a skinny man with a scruffy beard. He was standing in front of us, carrying a fishing rod.

"Need something?" he asked.

I gasped in surprise. I involuntarily grabbed on to Fuyutsuki's sleeve, and she grabbed hold of mine, too. She somberly pursed her lips, tensing up.

"There's no need to scream," the man said in a low voice, furrowing his brow.

Fuyutsuki kept clinging tightly to my sleeve, not saying a word. It was no use; she was frozen in place.

"Uh, are you a member of the Fireworks Research Society?" I asked.

"I'm Yuichi Kotomugi, the club president…though it's just me in the club," he replied lethargically. He opened the door to the prefab building and shoved his fishing rod inside. "How can I help you?"

"We just came to take a look."

"What about that girl? Is she blind?" he asked bluntly, having spotted Fuyutsuki's white cane.

"I—I am," said Fuyutsuki, finally managing to speak.

“You’re blind and you’re into fireworks? Well, I guess you don’t need to see them to enjoy them. The sound is part of the fun, too.”

The club president closed his eyes and nodded in approval.

Then, out of nowhere, Fuyutsuki asked something unexpected.

“Can you set off fireworks here?”

Kotomugi looked noticeably skeptical. “Why do you ask?”

“We noticed some fireworks being launched from campus the other day, so it’d make sense.”

I thought about the fireworks I’d seen on the day of the freshman party—the same day I’d met Fuyutsuki. It did seem like they’d been launched from around the Pond.

“I’d like to set off fireworks, too.”

“What’s wrong with watching them from afar with everyone else?”

“I’d prefer to experience it up close, if I can.”

“Easier said than done. Fireworks are dangerous. If you can’t see, you could end up hurting yourself.”

As he spoke, Kotomugi rolled up his sleeve, revealing burn scars pockmarking his arms. They must have been caused by fireworks. He was probably trying to give us a visual warning of the risks involved, and if Fuyutsuki could see, I’m sure it would’ve gotten the message across.

However, her expression was blank.

Seeing her lack of a reaction, the guy said, “Oh yeah,” and rolled down his sleeves again.

“What’s the matter?” Fuyutsuki asked.

“Nah, it’s nothing,” he replied dryly.

“Please tell me,” she urged, but Kotomugi just turned his back to her.

Fuyutsuki looked like she wanted to say something else, but I stepped in.

“Come on,” I said, and the two of us decided to go back to the terrace.

“Did something happen back there?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“It went all quiet. I figured that guy was making a gesture or something.”

I told Fuyutsuki about the burn scars I’d seen.

“Oh,” she muttered after hearing the story. “It makes me really sad when people just give up on explaining stuff.”

Judging by her tone, this was something she’d experienced countless times before.

I remembered hearing that humans absorbed about 70 percent of their

information through sight—but Fuyutsuki was blind. There were also times when people communicated using nothing but visual cues like eye contact or gestures, and if someone couldn't do that, they'd often just give up trying. I could understand why that might be disheartening.

"I, for one, don't want to give up," Fuyutsuki murmured.

A few moments later, though, she suddenly raised her voice, as if she'd come up with a great idea.

"I know!"

As we were walking down the street surrounded by fresh greenery, Fuyutsuki turned to me with a huge smile.

The way she'd shifted from her earlier downcast expression to this radiant grin startled me. The sunlight filtering through the leaves illuminated her pretty face. I couldn't help but think how cute her smile was.

However, what she said next brought me back to my senses.

"Let's have our own fireworks display!"

"Absolutely not!"

It sounded like such a hassle.

"Uhhh…," Fuyutsuki said, coming a stop. "I mean, don't you find this frustrating?"

I didn't feel that way in the slightest, but Fuyutsuki continued undeterred.

"I heard they have fireworks stores in Asakusabashi."

"It's still a firm no from me."

"Just let me say one more thing!"

"Oh yeah? And what's that?"

"You're a really nice guy, Kakeru."

"Huh? Are you already assuming I'll take you there?"

Fuyutsuki stifled a laugh, then grinned and said four simple words:

"I lost my bookmark."

"Uhhh…"

This time, I was the one who came to a stop.

Was this her way of saying I couldn't refuse?

"Please," she implored again, beaming at me.

In the end, I gave in.

"When do you want to go?" I said, utterly humiliated.

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At just ten thousand yen a month, my ultra-cheap dorm room had no air conditioning. The power limit for each floor was so low that even the smallest load could make the breaker trip, so buying a unit wasn't in the cards, either.

The floors were lined with rooms, each around sixteen square meters in size. If people were using rice cookers in more than two of those rooms at the same time, the breaker would trip. As a result, "What time are you cooking rice?" had become a frequent topic of conversation among the dorm residents.

Naturally, we didn't have our own showers or toilets in our rooms. There was a shared toilet and a large communal bath and shower room. The bath could only be used at specific times in the evening, but the showers were always available. Each room was furnished with single beds, study desks, and a refrigerator.

I was indifferent about interior design, so Narumi had taken charge of decorating our place. He'd even chosen the color of my bedsheets.

Our room had a subdued color scheme, with a dark brown rug, charcoal bedsheets, and gray curtains. As dilapidated as the building's exterior was, the inside of our room had turned into a very stylish space, complete with potted plants and downlights.

It was seven in the morning.

I got out of bed just as Narumi was pressing the switch on the rice cooker, and I headed to the shower room, towel in hand. We'd kept the window wide open, but it had been a humid night with no breeze whatsoever. Someone must have tripped the breaker, because even the fan had stopped.

"What's goin' on?" asked Narumi.

His perceptive question startled me.

"…Nothing," I said.

"Sorry. You're a guy, after all, Sorano."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"All you're doin' is takin' a shower before going to meet a girl, yet you look all wet behind the ears. I'm really jealous," Narumi said.

"You *are* making fun of me."

"I ain't, promise," responded Narumi, waving it off with a hand. "So whatcha

like about her?"

"I don't like her in that way."

"Damn. You're so cute it's killin' me."

"You are *so* making fun of me!"

Narumi denied it once again, roaring with laughter.

"Fuyutsuki just wants me to keep her company," I said, before asking, "Do you want to join?" on the off chance he could come.

Narumi furrowed his brow and shot me a look. "Man, you're such a chicken."

"Shut up."

"Chicken, chicken, chicken!"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

"Well, I can't make it anyway. I got work."

"Isn't that in the evening?"

"I thought you were interested in datin' her, Sorano. That was the impression I got, at least."

"Huh? All we do is chat, though. I've never even thought about it."

"Ya sure?"

"I mean, I still don't know how to deal with her—you know, with her eyesight and everything. I don't have the confidence to handle it as well as you do."

"Whaddaya mean, 'deal with her'?"

There was a rare hint of annoyance in Narumi's tone.

"Ah, my bad. I didn't mean it like that. It's just, you speak to her so normally."

"So why don't you act normally, too?"

"I don't even know what that means."

Was I supposed to avoid mentioning her eyesight when we chatted? Or choose streets that were easier for her to walk on? Or keep my hand on her? Or was I supposed to question every little thing and run all my doubts past her?

Since the opportunity had arisen, I decided to voice all my concerns to Narumi. His response was a simple one:

"Why don'cha just ask her?"

"Wouldn't that make things awkward?"

"It's worse havin' someone keep their distance from ya, though," Narumi responded, scratching his head. "I learned that firsthand."

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I bought some chicken nuggets at the convenience store right outside the dorm. I'd been craving them ever since Narumi called me a chicken.

I headed toward Tsukishima, eating as I walked. The sky was blue, and clouds gently drifted by. As I was crossing the Aioi Bridge, I looked out over the vast expanse of water and saw a fish jump into the air where the river met the ocean. The water's surface rippled gently, giving off a silver shimmer.

The swift currents of the Kanmon Straits back home in Shimonoseki gave them a refreshing feel—as if the waters carried away everything, both the good and the bad.

In contrast, the calm seas around Tokyo seemed to hold on to everything.

Ah, is this why so many people are drawn to Tokyo? I wondered, overcome by an unfounded sense of awe.

We were supposed to meet at nine, but I was aiming to arrive five minutes early.

When I'd offered to pick Fuyutsuki up in front of her apartment, she'd complained, "That doesn't seem very date-like."

"We're just going shopping together," I told her, but she laughed at me.

"That's what a date is."

In the end, Fuyutsuki had insisted on meeting at the foot of the Aioi Bridge.

I gazed out at the glittering sea as I crossed the bridge, but it didn't take long for bright spots to form in my eyes from the strong glare coming off the water. When I looked back ahead, trying to give my sore eyes some relief, I noticed that Fuyutsuki was already on the other side.

There were trees at the foot of the bridge creating a gentle shade, and sunshine poured down on Fuyutsuki through the leaves. She was dressed in a white blouse and a sheer skirt, and she had a leather bag slung over one shoulder. Fuyutsuki stood there in silence, looking almost ethereal to my dazzled eyes. I couldn't help but notice how breathtakingly beautiful she was.

"Hey, Fuyutsuki. It's me, Sorano. Did I keep you waiting?"

A lot of dates begin with this clichéd line, but it's usually the girl saying it to the guy.

"I've been waiting for two hours already," she replied.

"Well, that's your fault, then, right?"

"No way. I'm blaming you."

She laughed, then told me she was just kidding and suggested we get going.

“Okay, Tsukishima Station is this way,” I said.

“Which way is *this* way?” she asked.

“Sorry. I mean, we’re turning right.”

Under normal circumstances, pointing in a certain direction would have been enough to get the message across—but that didn’t work with Fuyutsuki.

Nor did she notice me staring at her face from the side as we walked.

“I thought you were interested in datin’ her, Sorano.”

Narumi’s words suddenly came rushing back.

When I thought about dating someone who couldn’t see, my gut instinct was that it’d be a challenge.

That was why I’d never viewed Fuyutsuki as a potential love interest.

I knew how rude that was.

Still, I doubted she cared whether I liked her or not anyway.

Just telling myself that excuse made my heart ache.

“Do you know where we’re going?” she asked.

“Oh yeah.”

“I’m so excited for this.”

Then she suddenly developed a slight bounce to her step.

That’s right. She was skipping.

“Huh?” I blurted out, making her turn in the direction of my voice.

“What is it?”

“You can skip?”

“You can skip with your eyes closed, can’t you?”

Seeing Fuyutsuki looking so happy caught me off guard, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Why are you laughing?” she said with a frown.

“Sorry.”

The two of us boarded the train.

“Let’s have our own fireworks display!”

It was an unusual request, especially considering the fact that she’d guilted me into it.

We were on the Toei Oedo Line, heading for the specialty fireworks stores in Asakusabashi. We were planning to ride the Toei Oedo Line to Daimon, then take the Toei Asakusa Line to Asakusabashi. Although it wasn’t the shortest route, I’d chosen the one with the easiest change to make things simpler for Fuyutsuki.

During the ride, I discovered that carrying a white cane didn’t guarantee that

someone would offer you their seat.

Just as I was thinking about how cruel the world could be, an elderly woman stood up and offered Fuyutsuki her spot.

"Thank you, but don't worry; I'm used to standing," she replied with a smile.

I guided Fuyutsuki to an empty spot just beside the doors, then turned to face her.

"Thanks for the help," she said.

"Nah, it's really no big deal."

Fuyutsuki turned her face to me but kept silent.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I was just thinking about what a gentleman you are, Kakeru."

"What do you mean?"

"You went to the effort of guiding me to a spot that wouldn't get crowded with people."

"I didn't!"

She was right, but I still felt like I had to reject it.

As soon as I raised my voice, Fuyutsuki started to giggle, making me miss my chance to refute her.

I felt kind of shy, standing there face-to-face with Fuyutsuki. Maybe it was just because she was beautiful, or maybe it was because I admired her for all the qualities I lacked, but whatever the reason, my heart raced whenever I looked at her.

The train clattered along. Whenever the evenly spaced lights of the subway flashed by the window, they briefly illuminated Fuyutsuki's face. I spoke louder than normal so I wouldn't be drowned out by the sound of the train.

"You know, I've been wondering this for a while, but why do you want to set off fireworks?"

"I've always loved them," Fuyutsuki replied with a smile.

"But you can't see them anymore. That's the part that intrigues me."

"Fireworks aren't just for looking at, you know."

"Well, no, but still…"

"There's also the sound of the bang, the smell of the explosives, and the oohs and aahs everyone makes. Next time you see a fireworks display, try enjoying it with your eyes closed. You'll realize it's a whole-body experience."

"That appreciation for fireworks sounds way too advanced for me, so I think I'll pass. I'm happy just crouching on the ground staring at sparklers."

"Oh, sparklers are great, too. Should we buy some if they have them?"

“You really *do* like fireworks, don’t you?” I said, impressed.

Fuyutsuki narrowed her eyes.

“My family and I used to go and see them all the time,” she said in a gentle tone of voice.

“Fireworks displays?”

“Yeah—back when I could still see. I used to go with my mom and dad.”

“So that’s why you want to set off fireworks,” I said, thinking I’d solved the puzzle—but Fuyutsuki shot me down.

“Sorry, that’s not what I meant. I only felt this strong desire to set off fireworks *after* I lost my sight.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, how should I put this? Like, it makes me think, ‘I really want to do my best!’”

“I’m not following,” I said, confused.

The train stopped at Shiodome Station, and people piled in. As the carriage began to get crowded, I got pushed forward and suddenly found myself much closer to Fuyutsuki.

“Has it gotten busy?” she asked.

“What makes you think that?” I said, wondering how she could tell when she couldn’t see.

“Your voice sounds closer.”

Fuyutsuki’s face was now right in front of mine, and she blinked in surprise.

“No, not really.”

“Thank you for protecting me,” she said with a smile, so close I could almost feel her breath.

I held my own breath for as long as I could until we reached our station stop, trying not to breathe on her.

It normally would’ve taken around thirty minutes on foot to get from the station to Asakusabashi, but since Fuyutsuki couldn’t walk very fast, it ended up taking us about an hour.

“Are you tired?” I asked her.

“I’m fine.”

“…*I’m* exhausted.”

“What was that?”

“Off we go.”

Fuyutsuki walked along the yellow tactile paving, tapping the ground with her white cane. I wondered if I'd be able to walk with my eyes closed—but it took me only a second to conclude that I wouldn't.

"We're taking a left here."

I'd looked up our destination in advance, and I continued guiding Fuyutsuki, holding my phone in one hand.

A man came walking straight toward us, his eyes glued to his phone. I had a bad feeling about what might happen and grabbed Fuyutsuki's arm, but just as I did, the man bumped into her with a *thud*.

He only glanced briefly at Fuyutsuki before striding away.

Huh?

I was furious.

How could he just look at her and walk away? He'd crashed into her, for God's sake.

Can't you tell she's blind?!

Just as I was about to yell that at him, Fuyutsuki grasped tightly on to my sleeve.

"Let it go," she said, shaking her head from side to side.

"But—"

"It's fine. This happens all the time."

I was still angry.

"But he—"

"He was probably holding his phone, right? I'm sure he got a message from someone he cares about." Fuyutsuki was smiling. "You sound angry. Please don't get mad," she said, giving me another smile.

How was Fuyutsuki so strong?

It felt as though she'd scolded me, and I gave a vague reply.

"I understand," I told her—though I wasn't quite sure what I was understanding.

I could feel my anger dissipating.

At the same time, the fact that I'd almost shouted "She's blind!" at a passerby made my chest feel tight. I'd nearly let my anger drive me to say something really insensitive.

Noticing that Fuyutsuki looked a little tired, I suggested we take a breather.

"Wanna stop by a café?" I asked.

We went to a place nearby—one of a chain of coffee shops that had originated in Aichi Prefecture. A grinning server greeted us and showed us to

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our seats. Once we'd gotten ourselves settled, another smiley server came to take our order.

Our eyes met, and I froze.

"Hayase?"

It was Yuuko Hayase, wearing an apron and a headscarf.

"Huh? What are you doing here?" she asked, the surprise clear on her face. "Oh, Koharu!"

"Ah, Yuuko. Good morning," Fuyutsuki responded with a smile. Her voice was slightly higher than normal.

"So, Sorano, you're hanging out with Koharu, are you?" Hayase asked, giving me a smug look.

"I'll get an iced coffee and set menu C," I told her.

"There's no reason to rush your order," she replied.

"I thought you were supposed to be working," I said, earning a giggle from Fuyutsuki.

"Fine, then." Hayase proceeded to write down what I wanted. "So what brings the two of you here today?"

"Fuyutsuki wants to put on a fireworks display," I explained.

"*Fireworks?*" responded Hayase, understandably doubtful.

"Do you want to help us set off the fireworks, Yuuko?"

"Sure, I'd love to! When's it happening?"

"Uh, when should it be?" Fuyutsuki asked, shifting the question to me for some inexplicable reason.

"Huh? You're asking me?"

Fuyutsuki covered her mouth with her small hands, smiling gently. The expression on her face made my heart skip a beat.

"We're here to buy the biggest fireworks we can find today," she declared enthusiastically.

"And her budget is one million yen," I joked.

"Don't underestimate the Fuyutsuki family fortune," she quipped back.

Me and Hayase went "Huh?" and "Seriously?" at the same time, making Fuyutsuki chuckle.

Hayase's eyes widened in surprise seeing our usual banter.

"Since when did you two get so close?"

"Do we seem close?" Fuyutsuki asked. "I bet Sorano always looks grumpy, doesn't he?"

"I dunno about that. He's got a pretty huge grin on his face right now." A

blatant lie from Hayase.

"You do?! Let me touch your face!"

"No way! Come on, just focus on ordering," I said. I couldn't quite grasp why Fuyutsuki wanted to touch my face, but more importantly, we couldn't hold Hayase up here forever.

"Sorry. I can't see the menu."

As I was looking at the menu for Fuyutsuki, Hayase suggested the iced milk tea. I knew Aichi was famous for its generous serving sizes, but still, it was huge—about twice the size of a normal iced tea.

"Would you be able to drink one that size?" I asked, pointing at the photo on the menu. Fuyutsuki just looked confused.

I apologized, but she looked just as confused as to why I was apologizing.

"Oh, sorry."

…It was one of those moments.

I'd mishandled the situation and made things awkward. I really didn't like it when that happened.

"The hot milk tea comes in a regular size," said Hayase.

"I'll have that one, then," said Fuyutsuki with a smile.

A short while later, Hayase came back over with our order. She'd even given us a complimentary boiled egg, likely as a gesture of hospitality. The table was now filled with coffee, milk tea, thick slices of toast with butter and sweet red bean paste, and a boiled egg.

"Thanks," I said. Hayase told us to take as long as we wanted, then left with a wave.

Fuyutsuki slowly reached out for the table.

"The milk tea is right in front of you," I said, spreading butter on my toast.

"I'm okay," she replied.

She carefully touched the saucer, then eased her fingers through the handle of the cup and gently lifted it with both hands. At soon as she took a sip, Fuyutsuki stuck out her tongue.

"It's so hot."

"Be careful."

"It's delicious, though," she assured me, laughing.

The smile she was giving me…felt kind of unfair.

The two of us never had that moment where we locked gazes, yet for some reason, every now and then, I got the feeling we were looking into each other's eyes. Whenever that happened, I got nervous, and my chest felt tight.

I channeled all my focus into spreading the red bean paste on my buttered toast—and before I knew it, I'd created a whole mountain of beans.

"Are you sure you don't want anything to eat?" I asked.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

"Not even a bite?"

"Are you going to feed me?"

"No chance."

"Meanie."

"What do you want to do for lunch today?"

"The truth is, I don't really like people watching me eat."

"Ah, I've heard a lot of girls feel that way."

"No, that's not what I…"

But Fuyutsuki trailed off before she finished her sentence. She giggled, and a smile stretched across her face.

"It makes me happy that you're treating me like a girl."

I felt shy whenever Fuyutsuki smiled at me, so I took a big bite of my toast to distract myself. She kept that grin on her face the whole time I was eating.

There it was again.

That smile of hers was *so* unfair.

"Hey," I said, having mustered up the courage to speak. It felt like a good time to ask a question that had been on my mind for a while. "If you don't want to talk about it, that's okay, but…"

After leaving the coffee shop, the two of us visited a few specialist fireworks stores.

They had a wide range of handheld fireworks on offer, as well as large, fifty-centimeter-long fireworks designed to set off at home. The selection was impressive—just as you'd expect from specialist dealers.

After looking at several stores and describing the range of fireworks to Fuyutsuki, I bought the ones she said she wanted. We ended up with quite a lot, and I was weighed down by the heavy plastic bags.

"Are you sure you want to take these home with you?" Fuyutsuki asked.

"It'll be fine. We might be able to set them off on campus, so it makes sense to keep them in my dorm. It's closer."

"Thank you."

As we were chatting in front of one of the fireworks stores in Asakusabashi, we realized we were blocking the entrance for other customers, so we went to

stand under a nearby tree instead.

"So when should we set them off?"

Fuyutsuki looked like she was about to jump for joy.

"We probably need permission to launch fireworks on campus," I said.

"Should we ask Yuuko?"

Despite being right by my side, Fuyutsuki was speaking in a really loud voice. I wanted to tell her to calm down, but when I saw her looking up at the sky, her eyes sparkling, I bit my tongue.

"So we've bought the fireworks. What should we do next?"

"Huh? You want to keep our date going?"

"I told you, this isn't a date…"

"I'm just messing with you. Those fireworks must be pretty heavy, though, and I'm sure it's a lot to carry, so why don't we just head home?"

One of my hands was taken up carrying all the fireworks we'd bought. She must have figured it out from that.

"Yeah. If we wander around with this many fireworks, we might get stopped by the police for possession of dangerous goods."

"Would they consider me an accomplice?"

"In this scenario, you'd be the main culprit."

"Oh, you always have a joke ready to go," Fuyutsuki said with a laugh. Her voice was high-pitched and clear.

I was starting to enjoy making her laugh.

"Should we take the water bus home?" she asked.

"The water bus?"

In my hometown, there was a ferry that took you to Moji Port on the opposite shore. I was surprised to hear that Tokyo also had a form of water transport.

According to Fuyutsuki, there was a water bus that ran from Asakusa and went down the Sumida River to Odaiba in Tokyo Bay. She told me she'd taken it in the past and that it would take us back to Tsukishima, so she wanted to ride it home.

You can ride a water bus?

I almost verbalized the question, but I stopped myself.

Fuyutsuki might've been blind, but she could still ride a boat, hear it cutting through the water, feel the wind, and enjoy it in all sorts of other ways.

"Wait a second, I'll look it up," I said, pulling out my phone. To my surprise, there was a water taxi stop nearby. "Oh, there's a stop in Ryogoku, just over the Kuramae Bridge. It looks like it goes all the way to the university."

“Thank you,” Fuyutsuki said, a smile spreading across her face.

“What for?” I asked.

“It was kind of you to look that up for me.” She was still smiling.

I couldn’t bring myself to look at her face any longer.

“Nah. It’s the normal thing to do.”

“Only someone with a Level 2 Kindness License would call that ‘normal.’”

“A *what* license?”

Fuyutsuki giggled, and I began leading her to the water bus stop.

We joked around as we walked, but it didn’t take long for us to arrive at our destination. We bought our tickets at the terminal building and boarded the water bus at the dock behind it.

We got on from the back of the boat. There was a ramp leading down into a cabin filled with seats and stairs going up to an open-air deck, from where you could get a full view of the Sumida River.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked.

“The open-air deck!” Fuyutsuki replied without hesitation.

Since the boat’s stairs were so narrow, I was forced to take the lead, holding Fuyutsuki by the hand.

“Your hand is so warm,” she said.

“Never mind that—just make sure you don’t hit your foot. It’ll hurt.”

Fuyutsuki laughed, not caring in the slightest.

The open-air deck had no seats and was surrounded by a square-shaped railing. It seemed like the rest of the passengers had gone inside, so luckily for us, we had it all to ourselves.

“Okay, there’s a waist-height railing straight ahead of us. Hold on to it.”

I could hear the low sound of the engine puttering away, while the boat seemed to gently sway back and forth in the water. I guided Fuyutsuki to the front of the boat, where she grabbed hold of the railing.

“Thank you. I’m so excited!”

“You do seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“I am. I never thought I’d get the chance to do something like this.”

“Well, if you’re okay with having me around, I’ll—”

I stopped before I could finish my sentence.

If you’re okay with having me around, I’ll keep you company whenever you like.

Having realized what I’d just been about to say, I cocked my head to one side. Was I happy to meet up with Fuyutsuki outside of college? Was I okay

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with getting more involved with her?

I didn't know. I had no idea how I felt.

Looking ahead, I could see the surface of the Sumida River stretching out before me.

The water gave off a humid scent reminiscent of midsummer rain. Over the top of that, I caught a whiff of the oil that was fueling the boat. Though it wasn't the most pleasant of smells, the blue sky was reflected on the surface of the Sumida River, and I found it, quite simply, beautiful.

"Is it pretty?" asked Fuyutsuki.

It wasn't until I heard her voice that I noticed I'd gone quiet. Her silence reminded me that she couldn't see the sky mirrored in the water's surface, which was such a shame.

"You can't see this view, can you?"

"No, but I'm still having fun. I think I saw the view from this very spot when I could still see. I was just recalling what it looked like."

"What did it look like then?"

"Hmm, I think it was cloudy."

"Today, it's really sunny, and the sky is blue. That blue color is reflecting off the water's surface, and it looks really beautiful."

Fuyutsuki turned toward me.

"I appreciate you telling me things like that, even when I don't ask. It's really kind of you."

"Well, I *did* just get my Level 2 Kindness License."

Fuyutsuki burst out laughing.

Just then, an announcement that we would soon be departing sounded from inside the boat.

"Hold on tight," I said.

"I've got this," Fuyutsuki replied, taking one hand off the railing to clench her fist tenaciously.

"I said hold on," I retorted, making her laugh yet again.

The water bus flew down the Sumida River faster than I'd expected. A strong breeze blew toward us, accompanied by the loud noise of the engine. The boat swayed gently from side to side in rhythm with the waves it was making, and every now and then, small splashes of water hit my cheeks, which felt refreshing.

"That breeze is so nice," I said.

"It really is. Thanks for helping me on board," Fuyutsuki replied.

We continued making our way down the wide Sumida River. There were buildings on both sides of the waterway, with parks and patches of greenery occasionally appearing along the banks. The sun was high in the sky, and we passed under bridges and elevated highways.

I described the scenery to Fuyutsuki as it went by, detailing everything I saw and felt so she could experience it, too.

"Whoa!"

"What is it?"

"The bridge in front of us has Eitai Bridge written on the side, so I'm guessing that's its name, but it's lower than the others. We better crouch down so we don't hit our heads!"

Fuyutsuki squatted down, still clutching on to the railing, and I did the same. The bridge soon passed over our heads.

"Sorry, it wasn't as low as I thought. We never would have hit our heads on that."

Still crouching down, I turned toward Fuyutsuki. Our faces were even closer than I'd assumed.

"Why did you make us crouch, then?" she asked with a smile.

Seeing her enjoy herself so much made me want to help her feel that way again.

Then I came to a realization:

Oh, I know what's happening here.

People who smile all the time and laugh out loud are total people magnets.

It was amazing how much Fuyutsuki smiled—even though she couldn't see.

At some point, she'd started to look radiant to me.

Her smiling face was so close to mine. The loud noise of the boat splashing through the water made my pulse quicken, and the river shimmered in the sunlight behind Fuyutsuki.

Overcome by embarrassment, I averted my gaze and rose to my feet.

"I guess we're in Tokyo Bay," I said.

A vast expanse of water spread out in front of us, and I began to catch a faint whiff of the ocean.

"We must be almost there," remarked Fuyutsuki.

"I can't see the university from this angle, though."

The water bus turned left. We must have been nearing Etchujima.

At that moment, the boat hit a wave, causing it to rock slightly. Fuyutsuki nearly lost her balance, so I put a hand over her shoulders to keep her steady.

She felt so soft. It was like I was hugging silk.

"Eek!"

"Oh, s-sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's fine," Fuyutsuki responded. "This is so much fun."

Seeing her smile like that in my arms made my heart skip a beat.

♪

"I'm back."

I was back in my apartment in Tsukishima on the forty-sixth floor.

"Ahhh, that was fun," I said to myself.

I felt my way along the handrail and counted the doors from the entrance. The second door was my room.

After leaving the café, Kakeru and I had ended up visiting several fireworks stores in Asakusabashi. Once we'd worn ourselves out from walking, he even joined me on the water bus. He'd made me laugh a lot, too.

I searched the wall for the light switch, then turned on the lights.

It was just a habit of mine; I couldn't see whether they were on or not, but the idea of the lights being on made me feel like I'd actually come home.

"Welcome home! You haven't eaten yet, have you?" Mom called out.

"Hi, Mom! What's for dinner?"

"I was thinking of making tempura."

"Yay!"

I was starving after walking around the entire day.

I got hungry, just like everyone else did.

It was just that eating in front of other people was so hard for me.

I ate at home without anyone's help, of course. Once Mom told me where the food was, I could feel my way to it, pick it up, and eat it on my own.

I was used to it by now, but the idea of getting food around my mouth still bothered me.

If I had to eat in front of Kakeru, it'd bother me even more.

"Did your date go well?"

"How did you know it was a date?"

"You took more care with your makeup than usual, and you tried on so many different outfits."

I did my own makeup by relying on my memory and the feel of my own face to help me. For clothes, I felt the fabric with my fingers and asked Mom what

color things were so I could pick out what I wanted to wear. Although I asked Mom to give me one final check before I went out, I was still capable of dressing myself.

Today, however, I'd been more determined than usual. I wanted to look good for Kakeru, so I'd woken up earlier—or I'd happened to wake up earlier, at least.

I'd had a shower, then taken my time getting dressed.

Not once had it felt like a chore.

In fact, the mere thought of wanting to look good made it so much fun.

If I'm having this much fun simply getting dressed up, what's it going to be like when I actually see him?

I hadn't been able to stop myself from feeling like that.

"You're smiling," Mom said with a laugh.

Thinking about my date with Kakeru had brought a smile to my face.

"I am not," I replied, trying to play it off. I felt so embarrassed.

There had been so many fireworks Kakeru had never seen before. He'd told me what they all looked like and read out the descriptions and warnings. By the time we were done, his voice was hoarse from talking so much.

That was the sort of thing that made Kakeru so kind.

Our date had been a short one, lasting less than half a day.

Still, the fact that he'd made time for me and that we were able to spend it together made my heart leap with joy.

Occasionally, Kakeru would speak to me in a particularly gentle tone of voice, as though he was being extra careful not to hurt my feelings.

"If you don't want to talk about it, that's okay…"

I'd sensed his kindness whenever he said that.

"That must be so tough, being blind."

"You're really okay going outside?"

There are people in the world who say things like that.

It's sad but true.

It serves as a reminder of just how rare being blind is.

Most people simply aren't used to it.

I just want to tell them "I'm a normal person."

Sure, when I'd first been told I was going to lose my sight, it had come as a shock.

But over time, I'd gotten used to it and accepted that fact.

I could still eat meals and take baths.

I could still use my phone and listen to audiobooks.

I could still do my makeup, dress up nicely, and wear skirts.

I couldn't wear shoes with thin heels because they made it hard to walk on the tactile paving, but I could still wear boots and sandals.

To the surprise of many, I live a pretty normal life.

There are lots of things I can't do unaided, but I still manage to get by.

I've learned to ask for help when I can't do something.

It's even helped me make friends.

But that's why I don't want people to be *too* worried.

I might be blind, but there are still loads of things I want to do.

Still, people just assume my life is a struggle—and they distance themselves from me because of it.

That was the thing that upset me the most.

But Kakeru was different.

"How do things look to you when you're blind? Is everything dark?"

He was trying to understand me.

"Uhhh."

"If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine," he added, so hesitantly it made me laugh.

"People tend to think things are pitch-black, but in my case, it's the opposite."

"How so?"

"It's like a whitish, transparent haze, I guess."

"Whoa."

There it was again. "Whoa." That must have been a habit of his. It was pretty cute.

That catchphrase came out when Kakeru was thinking carefully about what to say. I liked that about him.

"You don't have to answer this question, either, but…"

"No, go ahead. Hit me with it."

"When did you lose your sight?"

I was diagnosed with cancer when I was in sixth grade.

They told me I had a small tumor in my brain, about the size of a pinkie fingernail.

The first surgery was over before I knew it. I almost felt like, *Oh, is it over already?*

But in my third year of middle school, they found that the cancer had spread.

This time, it was in the retinas of both my eyes.

I was given a choice: either have both my eyes removed, or keep them and undergo surgery and chemotherapy.

I chose to keep my eyes. I had the surgery, and I started chemo.

I had to stay in the hospital for a while, so I couldn't go to my graduation ceremony.

"Chemotherapy was really tough. My hair fell out, I felt dazed, and my memory was all foggy."

For some reason, I wanted Kakeru to know the whole story.

So I told him everything.

"After that, I lost my eyesight. I learned braille, went back to studying, and got my high school equivalency diploma four years later. Truth is, I'm a year older than you, Kakeru. You should show me more respect."

I ended my story with a joke.

I was the one who hadn't been able to bear the heavy topic any longer.

It had taken a lot of courage to reveal the truth. I wondered if I should have left out the part about being a year older than him, and I soon began to regret mentioning it. Kakeru reacted with a blunt "Whoa" before continuing in a gentle tone of voice.

"When's your birthday, Fuyutsuki?"

"March twenty-eighth."

"Mine's April second. Our birthdays are really close together."

Due to the way school cut-off dates work, he was only a few days younger than me, despite being a grade below.

"You're just five days older, so I think I show you plenty of respect," he added.

I hadn't wanted him to console me with sympathetic comments like "That must have been so hard" or "You've done so well."

I didn't want him to take pity on me.

All I wanted was for him to hear my story.

He seemed like someone who'd truly understand.

There it was. That was it.

His kindness was irresistible.

"Kakeru?"

"Yeah?"

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“You’re really kind, aren’t you?” I said.

Kakeru’s voice cracked as he tried to refute me.

He sounded cute when he was flustered.

I like that about him.

He cares for me in his own quiet way, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

I like his warm hands.

I like his high-pitched voice.

I like how he made me laugh.

I like his kindness.

Sometimes, a tiny part of me wishes I could see his face.

I was certain I’d still fall for him if I knew what he looked like.

I like Kakeru.

But then a thought suddenly crossed my mind.

I was scared of confessing my feelings.

Would it bother him that I had a disability? I couldn’t help but wonder.

Kakeru isn’t that kind of person.

As much as I believe that, I was still unbearably anxious and scared.

But what if I *could* see? What if I *weren’t* disabled?

Even then, I was sure I’d be scared.

Oh, right.

Confessing your feelings is always scary.

I couldn’t help but smile with delight. Making this kind of discovery filled me with joy.

I was happy. Even with my condition, I could still know what love is.

I wondered how Kakeru felt about me. Would he tell me he liked me?

Was I the one who was supposed to confess? What if he rejected me?

We might have added each other on LINE, but he’d never contacted me first.

“Hee-hee.” I couldn’t help but laugh.

It was all so much fun—so much fun it hurt. My chest felt like it was going to explode.

I felt so happy and so pained at the same time.

“…Kakeru.”

Embracing the mess of emotions I was experiencing, I began to cry.

*

Truth be told, there was one thing that made me want to leave my dirt-cheap ten-thousand-yen dormitory as soon as possible.

I'd already gotten over several minor hang-ups, such as having to share a room, the breaker tripping so frequently, and the fact that the bath and toilet were separate.

So what was my issue, then?

Cutter training.

A tradition forced on all dorm residents, cutter training had been going for over a hundred years, ever since Commodore Perry first landed in Japan. However, in that time, the tradition had definitely been elaborated on.

Dorm residents would gather at Harumi Wharf before five AM and get in small boats called cutters. Then we were relentlessly made to row around the Tokyo Bay coastline until the sun came up, shouting "heave-ho" in unison. Some people got blisters on their hands, while others had the skin peel off their buttocks. It was an incredibly outdated pursuit.

All of this was to prepare for the Cutter Rowing Experience that our dorm held at the college festival in early June.

The cutter-style rowing boats had six benches seating two rowers each. However, during the festival, only three of those benches held rowers, with the others taken up by festival attendees. The route spanned the triangular stretch of water bordered by Etchujima, Tsukishima, and Toyosu, and after going under the Harumi Bridge, we'd loop back around. It was one of the top attractions at the festival.

With only half the usual number of rowers on board, we had a huge burden to bear, and all the extra passengers weighing the boat down made it feel like we were rowing through an ocean of lead. During the festival—which ran over one weekend—we were made to row four times daily from eleven AM to four PM with just an hour break in between each trip. We had a lunch break sandwiched in the middle, but the ordeal was still beyond grueling. Inevitably, we were left with intense muscle pain in our arms, backs, and waists. Students came out of this series of hellish experiences looking slightly more muscular, but for someone like me, who had zero interest in bulking up, it made me seriously consider not just leaving the dorm but going back to my family home and shutting myself away.

But the college festival arrived, and I was still there.

I'd made it to the final ride. Amazingly, I'd gotten that far.

I was finally going to be freed from this hell… That thought brought me

some measure of relief as we boarded the rowboat for the last time.

Beside me was Narumi, who was getting more and more muscular every time we made the trip. Two smiling women in life jackets sat on the bench in front of us.

"You've got this, Kakeru," said Fuyutsuki.

"Wait! Aren't we turning to the right?" asked Hayase.

Why were *they* here?

"Put some oomph into it, Sorano!" yelled Narumi.

"You're pushing too hard, Narumi!" I snapped back.

"Eek!" yelped Fuyutsuki.

"Fuyutsuki, are you okay? You're not scared, are you?"

I couldn't help but worry about her and whether she'd be okay not being able to see. But it seemed like I had no reason for concern.

"I'm having so much fun!" she reassured me. "Go, Kakeru, go! Go, Kakeru, go!"

I couldn't help but find myself taken aback at how excited she was.

"Why are you enjoying this so much?" I asked her.

"The breeze and the smell of the sea is so refreshing! What's not to enjoy?!"

Water splashed up from the sea below, and I felt the cold sensation on my cheek and smelled the strong scent of the ocean.

Tiny droplets of water glistened as the light hit them.

There was Fuyutsuki, smiling. I didn't know why, but I was drawn to her smile.

"True that!" Narumi piped up. "The sea really awakens a man's adventurous spirit! If this doesn't getcha fired up, nothing will!"

Shouting "heave-ho," Narumi lifted his oar out of the water, then dipped it back in and pushed the handle forward powerfully. I matched his actions, yelling and using all my strength to pull my handle toward me. When our oars touched the surface, they moved vigorously through the water, and the momentum propelled our cutter forward with a jolt.

Fuyutsuki laughed, swaying backward and forward along with the boat.

"This is amazing!"

Narumi, who was now a hundred percent fired up, let out a loud "heave-ho!" *Seriously?* I thought, fed up—but I joined in with his chanting anyway.

"Once this is over, I'm gonna drop out of college and grow vegetables back home…," I said, acting like some sort of movie character just before they die. However, the naive girl in front of me took my words at face value.

“You’re dropping out?!”

“He isn’t really, Koharu. Don’t fall for his silly jokes,” Hayase said.

She’d been tightly holding on to Fuyutsuki’s hand for some time now, and she looked pale.

“Hey, Hayase—”

“Heave-ho!”

“—okay?”

“What was that?” she responded crabbily. I’d been trying to ask if she was okay, but it must have been drowned out by Narumi’s shouting.

“Hayase! Are you—?”

“Heave-ho!”

Narumi shouted over me yet again.

“What did you say?!”

“Heave-ho!”

He was so loud.

“I was asking if you were okay!”

“Heave-ho!”

“—not okay!”

He’d yelled over Hayase this time.

Narumi’s shouts were starting to get a little much for me. They kept interrupting my conversation.

There was an upperclassman sitting at the stern of the boat, manning the tiller, and I called out to him, suggesting we ease up a bit.

“Someone’s feeling seasick,” I explained, “so let’s slow down.”

“Stop rowing, everyone,” he commanded, and we all raised our oars.

“Thank you,” said Hayase.

“You’re so kind,” added Fuyutsuki.

“Sorry, my bad. I got kinda carried away there,” Narumi said, apologizing.

The boat moved along at a slower pace. From the bay, the high-rise buildings of Tsukishima looked even taller. The sunlight reflected off the water’s surface, making it glisten like a wobbling mirror. There was a gentle breeze in the air, and Fuyutsuki held down her hair as the wind moved around her.

I gazed at her, mesmerized. When I realized what I was doing, I felt so embarrassed. The fact that I’d been doing it involuntarily made my cheeks burn even more.

“Did you know that every year, there’s a fireworks display at the end of the student festival?” Fuyutsuki asked with a gentle smile, her eyes narrowed.

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“I’m on the festival committee, so I’d really appreciate it if you could take Koharu,” said Hayase.

“I’ve got night shift starting at seven,” said Narumi.

…He was going to his part-time job after *this* hell? The fatigue-detecting system in his brain must have been totally busted.

“Okay, I’ll go with you, Fuyutsuki. We can meet up later on. Wait for me on the terrace of the student center.”

“Sure!” she replied.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but she looked really happy.

“Come to think of it, we still haven’t set off the fireworks we bought.”

“Yeah. If I’d known they were going to have some at the festival, I wouldn’t have needed to buy so many.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Hayase smiled at me, looking a little exasperated. “Oh well. At least you got a date with Koharu out of it,” she teased.

Next, Narumi chimed in with some unnecessary information. “He even took a shower before he left.”

“Seriously? You’d better watch out, Koharu…,” Hayase said, giving me a distrustful look.

“Watch out for what?” Fuyutsuki asked, looking confused.

“Seriously, cut it out,” I snapped, trying to smooth things over.

At that moment, the boat suddenly shook.

“Hyah!” Hayase squealed.

A wave of chuckles filled the boat hearing her high-pitched yell.

“Hey, don’t laugh,” Hayase said, looking embarrassed—but this just made it even funnier, causing us all to laugh even harder.

Cast in the light of the setting sun, we turned the cutter back around toward the university. As we got closer, we began to hear a cover band performing. It was impossible to make out the lyrics, but we could hear the guitar and the drums, along with the cheers of the excited spectators.

*

Was it normal to get muscle pain the same day you overexerted yourself?

My arms were trembling, and my lower back felt like it was about to break. I didn’t even have the strength to open a bottle cap, and my legs were barely supporting me. My entire body was exhausted.

I felt like the ground was shaking, likely because I'd spent so much time on the boat. I was even having trouble walking as I headed to our usual spot on the terrace, dragging my heavy legs along with me.

For some reason, the thought of the two of us meeting up made me nervous.

"I'm on the festival committee."

"I've got night shift starting at seven."

My head had begun to spin when I heard Hayase's and Narumi's excuses. I'd been unbelievably happy. Was this feeling what I thought it was? Yeah, it must be.

When had it started? Was it when I saw how excited Fuyutsuki was earlier?

Or had it started long before that?

The idea of me and Fuyutsuki spending time together alone made me so excited.

There weren't many people outside the student center where the terrace was. The festival was taking place on the large grass lawn near the main entrance, where at that moment, the yukata contest—the last event—was being held.

I could hear Hayase's voice, amplified through a microphone; she must have been the host or something. Hayase was involved with the student festival committee in addition to her other responsibilities. She was *so* different from me that I found myself beginning to admire her.

Fuyutsuki was in our normal spot, drinking her usual milk tea. She was just sitting there waiting for me as the world around us began to take on an orange hue.

The moment I saw Fuyutsuki, my heart skipped a beat. Clutching my chest, I called out to her.

"Sorry, did I keep you waiting?"

"No, it's fine. I haven't been waiting long."

"Has your milk tea gone cold?"

"It's in a paper cup, so it cools down pretty quickly anyway."

The wind was relatively chilly, considering it was early summer.

A cheer erupted in the distance coming from the yukata contest, and Hayase's lively voice echoed through the twilight.

"Kakeru?"

"Hmm?"

"I thought you'd disappeared."

"Oh yeah. I went quiet, didn't I?"

"You're such a meanie."

The two of us exchanged our usual lighthearted banter, then smiled at each other. We had a nice atmosphere going.

Then Fuyutsuki muttered something.

“I wish I could have worn a yukata.”

“I bet your super-rich family own some pretty expensive ones.”

“My mom used to wear this yukata with a spider lily pattern on the obi. I always wanted to wear it.”

“You should have entered the yukata contest.”

“You think so?”

“I’m sure you’d have come first.”

“If I had, would you have voted for me?”

“Well…,” I said jokingly.

“Give me a serious answer.”

Fuyutsuki’s voice suddenly took on a stern tone, making me a little nervous.

“Of course I would’ve voted for you, Fuyutsuki.”

“Even though I’m blind? Would you still pick me as your favorite?”

Her voice was trembling.

It sounded feeble—as if it could dissipate at any moment.

I’d never seen Fuyutsuki look so anxious.

“Does having a disability really matter in a yukata contest?”

I wondered if this straightforward response would bother her, and as soon as I said it, I felt a surge of anxiety.

Of *course* it mattered. Deep down, everyone knew that. It was impossible not to take note of such differences.

But—

“But I would have voted for you regardless.”

Fuyutsuki’s face looked red. Was that because of the sunset?

“That sounds almost like a confession,” said Fuyutsuki, teasing me.

It was so unfair of her to mock me like that.

“No, that’s not what I meant. I’m just saying you’d look good.”

“I’d look good?”

She stared at me, a bewildered look on her pretty face. I felt self-conscious.

“No, seriously, it’s not what it sounds like. I just assumed a rich girl like you would be used to wearing yukata.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Fuyutsuki replied, laughing.

The glow of the setting sun made her look radiant.

Before I knew it, the words had slipped out of my mouth.

“So *this* must be love.”

“Huh?”

Fuyutsuki’s expression made it look like she was frozen in time.

Panicking, I tried to smooth things over.

“I mean, you must really love fireworks. You’re always talking about them.”

Fuyutsuki laughed a little and turned her eyes toward the sky.

“I think it would be wonderful if we could put on our own fireworks display. It’d be such a special day—a memory that would last a lifetime.”

It looked like she was imagining fireworks exploding in the sky she couldn’t see.

“You know those fireworks we impulse bought the other day?” Fuyutsuki continued. “They must have been pretty heavy.”

“They’re just sitting quietly in the corner of my room now, looking at me resentfully.”

“I wish they’d told us there would be fireworks at the student festival.”

“When would they have done that?”

“Uh… Maybe at the entrance ceremony?”

“‘Congratulations to all our new students! I know this is a little ahead of time, but we’re going to be setting off fireworks at the student festival!’ Something like that?” I asked, laughing.

“Be serious,” Fuyutsuki retorted, but she was laughing, too.

I looked up at the sky. Dark clouds had gathered, and a cold wind was blowing in.

“And now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for! The glorious winner of the yukata contest is…!”

Hayase’s voice echoed from afar, followed by a loud cheer.

Fuyutsuki and I listened to her together.

There was a comfortable atmosphere between us as we had an unmemorable conversation, musing about how hoarse Hayase’s voice would be the next day and commenting on the crowd’s enthusiasm.

We enjoyed a moment of calm, listening to the voices in the distance.

Then all of a sudden, something changed.

Raindrops began to fall, one by one. The smell of rain instantly filled the air, and in no time at all, the sound of rain grew intense.

The fireworks display was canceled, so we decided to share an umbrella and walk back to Fuyutsuki’s apartment.

It happened as we were saying good-bye to each other in front of her apartment building.

That day, hidden beneath the umbrella, Fuyutsuki and I shared our first kiss.

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4. Monja

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Tsukishima was home to Monja Street, a street lined with restaurants serving savory *monja* pancakes, where the smell of sauce drifted through the air. It was nearby, so I'd always planned to visit at some point, but the opportunity had never really come up. Eventually, I'd completely forgotten that Tsukishima was famous for it.

The day after Fuyutsuki and I kissed, I visited one of Tsukishima's *monja* restaurants.

It was my first time kissing anyone before, so I was unsure how to process the events of the previous day. After anxiously puzzling things over, I concluded that I had no choice but to ask Narumi for advice. After listening in silence, he came up with a suggestion.

"How 'bout we go get some *monja*?!"

The *monja* restaurant we went to was small, with only six seats. It was full when we arrived, but luckily we managed to take the places of some customers who were just leaving.

All the other people there were proper adults, which made me restless. I was glad I'd enrolled in college, but I was the kind of indoorsy student who spent most of their time loafing about inside their dorm. Eating out with a friend felt like a mini adventure for me.

"Wait, people from Kansai don't eat *monja*, do they? You guys eat *okonomiyaki* instead, right?"

I was sitting on a backless stool looking at the menu board. There was no *okonomiyaki* on there—just a range of different types of *monja* pancakes.

Narumi, sitting across from me, was finely chopping up fried cabbage with his metal spatula. He seemed like a total pro at it. When a tough-looking guy like him handled a spatula in front of a griddle, it inevitably made him look like a nighttime street food vendor.

"My mom's from Gunma, so I'm mixed—half from Kanto, half from Kansai. We used to have *monja* all the time at home."

"What d'you mean 'mixed'?" I asked. "Hang on, Gunma's actually in the Kanto region?"

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“You just turned half of Japan against ya saying that.”

Narumi glared at me.

“Whatever. Let’s just make the *monja* already!” I said in a desperate attempt to pacify him.

Narumi started pouring the Worcestershire sauce–flavored *monja* mixture onto a donut-shaped base of cabbage.

The sizzling sound of oil and water leaped off the griddle, and the scent of Worcestershire sauce wafted up from it.

It looked delicious.

Just then, the sliding door of the restaurant rattled open.

A lone woman stepped inside. It was Hayase.

I wondered if she was with a friend, too.

Just then, Narumi raised a hand and called out to her.

“Over here!”

“Sorry, did I keep you guys waiting?” she asked.

Hayase took the seat by the wall next to Narumi, then asked the server for an oolong tea as if she’d done it a million times.

“What’s going on?”

I demand an explanation, Mr. Narumi.

I shot him a look.

“Gimme a moment! This is the important part,” he said, breaking the cabbage base and spreading the *monja* all over the griddle. It started to sputter, releasing clouds of steam.

“After three more minutes, you hafta poke it with the small spatula.”

Hayase watched Narumi.

“You sure know what you’re doing. I thought people from Kansai didn’t eat *monja*, though.”

“I asked the same thing just before,” I said.

Narumi ignored my comment. Judging by the look on his face, he was pleased that he’d been asked.

“My mom’s from Gunma, so I’m mixed—half from Kansai, half from Kanto.”

“What do you mean ‘mixed’? Ah-ha-ha.”

Hayase laughed so hard she ended up staring at the ceiling.

“Wait, Gunma’s in Kanto?”

“I asked the same thing…”

Was this Narumi’s go-to conversation whenever he was in front of a griddle?

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The thought brought a smile to my face as I sat there in front of it.

I looked at Narumi, expecting him to snap at Hayase like he had at me.

But he didn't.

"My mom's folks live way out in the sticks."

"Hey!"

Wasn't Hayase making an enemy out of half of Japan, too?

Just then, the serving lady came back with Hayase's drink.

"Cheers!"

Hayase and Narumi clinked their glasses against mine.

"It's just about ready," said Narumi.

We poked at the pancake, which had turned crispy on one side, with our small spatulas. I put a small piece of the hot *monja* in my mouth, burning my tongue. The scent of the sauce went up my nostrils, and the savory taste of cabbage spread throughout my mouth.

"Tastes pretty good," I said.

"Yeah. It's delicious," Hayase added, looking surprised.

"Right?" replied Narumi. He seemed pleased with himself.

"That reminds me, Sorano. Where are you from again?" asked Hayase.

"The western tip of Honshu."

"People don't really eat *monja* in Shimonoseki, do they?" Narumi chimed in. "Don't y'all just grill soba on roof tiles?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?" asked Hayase.

"It's called *kawara* soba."

"It cracked me up when he showed me a photo. They grill green tea soba on roof tiles," Narumi explained.

He looked it up on his phone, then showed a picture to Hayase.

"You weren't kidding. Why grill the noodles on a roof tile, though?"

"They conduct just the right amount of heat. Every family near where my parents live has a tile of their own."

"So it's like the local equivalent of a Dutch oven?"

There *was* a local dish that grilled soba noodles on a tile, but the part about every household having a tile was obviously a joke. The fact that Hayase took it seriously made me laugh.

"How's it anything like a Dutch oven?"

"Oh! You were lying to me!"

"I was clearly joking. Anyway, let's eat some *monja*."

Sure enough, Hayase realized I was lying, and Narumi laughed along with

me as he started to dig in.

After enjoying our regular *monja*, we devoured the crispy noodle *monja* and another called the Super-Tasty Monja with *mentaiko*, mochi, and cheese in it.

We'd originally come to the restaurant to talk about the Fuyutsuki situation, but with Hayase around, I didn't know how to bring it up.

Having missed my chance to broach the topic, I polished off one *monja* after the next, making the same comment—"This is great!"—over and over as I did.

"Sorano, are you okay?" I heard Narumi ask. He sounded concerned.

"Never been better."

"You're eating *way* too much," remarked Hayase with an air of exasperation.

I'd ended up eating way more food than I usually would. Maybe the *monja* was just that tasty. The other two were already full, but I suggested ordering another one anyway.

I'd gotten carried away and eaten so much it had started to hurt.

"All right. It's about time you told us about Fuyutsuki," Narumi said. He must've sensed my reluctance to bring it up, but at that moment, I wasn't in any condition to talk.

"Just…let me rest a bit," I said.

I caught the server's attention and asked for some more oolong tea.

"I came along because I heard you had something interesting to share, but it seems like this just turned into a *monja* party," Hayase said with a laugh, holding her glass of tea.

I took my refilled glass and guzzled the contents down—but there was something off about the taste.

"Is this…alcohol?"

I'd never drunk alcohol before, but the oolong tea had a sort of hand sanitizer smell to it and tasted weirdly bitter.

"Sorry! Did I give you someone else's oolong tea highball?" the serving lady asked, rushing over in a fluster. She soon came back with my tea.

"Are you all right, Sorano?" I heard Hayase ask, sounding concerned.

"I'm fine."

"Your eyes are startin' to glaze over," Narumi said with a grin.

It must be because I'd drunk half the glass in one go.

My thoughts were clear, but my vision was swaying, and I almost felt like I was in a dream. It was like I was having some sort of out-of-body experience, looking down at myself through a shaky camera. Is this what it felt like to be drunk?

"Ah-ha-ha."

I found myself laughing, even though nothing was funny.

"Uh-oh," said Narumi. "I dunno if you're in a state to talk about Fuyutsuki now."

"Don't worry, it's fine. I can talk."

"Well, maybe being slightly tipsy is what ya needed," said Narumi, looking straight at me. "So tell us what happened with Fuyutsuki."

"I already told you."

"All you said was 'I kissed Fuyutsuki. What should I do now?' How am I supposed to offer any advice based on that?"

"Nooo, I didn't kiss her. *She* kissed *me*."

"Either way, just hurry up and tell us!" said Hayase.

She seemed like she really wanted to know.

*

After the student festival fireworks were canceled due to the rain, Fuyutsuki and I had decided to shelter beneath the outdoor stairs right next to the terrace.

I could think of two options we could take: We could either continue sheltering from the downpour, or I could walk Fuyutsuki back in the rain.

Logically, I knew taking Fuyutsuki home was the right thing to do.

The truth was, however, that I wanted to spend a little more time with her.

The temperature had dipped on the terrace, and it was getting cold. Neither of us had an umbrella.

That was when it happened.

"Achoo!" Fuyutsuki sneezed adorably.

We discussed heading back to the dorm for a while, and I invited Fuyutsuki to my room.

I covered her with the shirt I'd been wearing and walked hand in hand with her. By the time we reached the dorm, both of us were soaked from the rain, so we wrapped ourselves in bath towels to dry.

"You got pretty wet back there. Are you okay? Did you manage to dry off?" I asked.

"I'm fine. Thank you for the towel," Fuyutsuki replied. "Um, this is sort of awkward to ask…but has the rain made any of my clothes go see-through?"

Fuyutsuki brought her long hair to the front, exposing the nape of her neck. I knew she wanted me to look at her clothes rather than her neck—I genuinely did

—but I couldn't help but take a glimpse.

The rain had made her thin white blouse look translucent, revealing the camisole she had on underneath.

The combination of her bare neck and the camisole peeking out through her clothes was pretty alluring, and I could feel some weird feelings begin to stir within me.

I pretended to stay calm, unsure of what to say.

I couldn't just say "Your blouse is see-through." A blunt statement like that would just come as a shock.

"It's fine. It's not see-through," I assured her. "That said, you do look cold. Wrap this towel around your shoulders."

I put the towel around her.

…*This is so awkward.*

Fuyutsuki was sitting on my bed.

Unsurprisingly, I'd never been alone with a woman in my small room before. I'd been the one to invite her in, but I'd begun to feel oddly nervous and found myself focusing on the sound coming from the clock on the wall. With each *tick* of the second hand, I could hear the beating of my own heart.

After a few minutes of silence, Fuyutsuki said, "So this is your room, Kakeru?"

"Y-yeah. I share it with Narumi. That's my bed you're sitting on."

"This is your bed?"

Fuyutsuki lay down and buried her face by my pillow. I could see her long, pale legs sticking out from underneath her skirt.

"Uh, you should probably watch out… I can almost see your underwear."

Fuyutsuki jolted upright, pressing her hands against the bottom of her skirt.

"……"

Silence. I felt so awkward. My heart was beating so loud.

"Did you see them?"

"I warned you before I caught a glimpse."

"You're such a perv."

"I told you, I didn't see anything!"

"I'll take your word for it," Fuyutsuki said, laughing again.

She really never did stop laughing.

"That was such a shame," she added.

"Seriously, I saw nothing!"

"Oh, I was talking about the fireworks."

I'd jumped to the wrong conclusion, and my cheeks started to flush. I was so embarrassed I wanted to die.

"They'll do it again next year. It's a staple of the student festival, apparently."

"I want to join that club. Setting off fireworks at the student festival… That's like the epitome of youth. I bet they'd turn me down, though."

"Why don't we both join?"

"Huh? Really?!"

"Doesn't bother me."

"It's a promise."

That settled, Fuyutsuki turned toward the window.

"What's up?" I asked her.

"The rain doesn't sound as loud as it did before."

She was right; the rain I could see through the window wasn't as heavy.

I thought now might be the best time to take Fuyutsuki back to her apartment, so we went outside.

What's more, I was at my limit.

If we'd stayed together any longer, I might have lost control of myself.

I'd kept having to swallow my saliva watching Fuyutsuki's bare feet move across the carpet. Fortunately, my sense of reason won out, but only just, and the thought of what might have happened made my heart race.

Sharing my umbrella, Fuyutsuki and I walked together beneath the streetlights. It was hard for her to use her white cane, so she held on to my arm, and we looked like we were taking part in a three-legged race.

The misty drizzle seeped into the umbrella, getting my cheek wet.

Fuyutsuki smiled beside me. I could smell her shampoo mixed in with the scent of the rain.

I recited a Buddhist chant to try to distract myself, but as far as I could remember, it was only seven syllables long. I then tried to recall the digits of pi, but I only knew it up to eight decimal places, so that kept my mind occupied for all of three seconds.

"C-come to think of it, what are we going to do with all the fireworks we bought?" I asked Fuyutsuki.

"Let's set them off in the summer with everyone."

"Can you go out at night?"

"Yeah. I mean, the social where we met was at nighttime, wasn't it?"

“Good point. Okay, then let’s invite Narumi and Hayase.”

“Sounds good,” she said with a satisfied smile.

Fuyutsuki opened her mouth again.

“Hey, Kakeru…”

This time, however, she sounded somewhat hesitant.

“You don’t have a girlfriend or anything, do you?”

“A girlfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh? No, I don’t.”

“Oh, good,” Fuyutsuki responded, sounding relieved.

…What does she mean by that?

“What do you mean?”

“Ah! Uh! Huh?! Oh, you know. You’re so kind to me, so I’d feel bad if you had a girlfriend. I mean, you’re letting me cling on to your arm right now.”

“Is that it?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“What do you mean?” replied Fuyutsuki, looking confused.

“Oh, um, hmm?! I mean, you know… It just…made me wonder whether you liked me.”

“Huh? Wait, what?!”

The two of us just kept letting out all sorts of strange sounds.

We were getting nowhere.

“Guess I’m not very good at these kinds of jokes,” I said, making it look like I’d been kidding.

Fuyutsuki had gone red in the face, and she softly pinched my arm as if she was a little annoyed.

“Meanie.”

“That hurt.”

“It’s what you deserve,” she said.

Then Fuyutsuki seemed to have some kind of idea.

“All right,” she said quietly, sounding determined.

“What’s up?”

“Did you know that even if you’re blind, there’s a way to see a person’s face?”

“There is?”

She gave me a satisfied smile.

“We touch people’s faces with our hands to see what they look like.”

“So basically, you wanna do that to me?”

We were standing face-to-face outside Fuyutsuki's apartment.

"May I?" she asked.

Fuyutsuki gently touched my chest. She ran her fingertips upward, eventually reaching my face, where her small, cold hands cupped my cheeks.

"Can you crouch down a little?"

"Like this?" I said, squatting down.

Then something warm touched my lips. Fuyutsuki was right in front of me, her eyes closed, and her soft lips were against mine.

We were kissing.

When I realized what was happening, my heart started beating so hard it felt like it was going to explode.

One second passed, then two, then three.

Fuyutsuki let out a small "Mm," then moved her lips away.

"Kakeru…

"How are you with *these* kinds of jokes?"

Fuyutsuki's words made my heart throb so intensely it hurt.

I was frozen, unable to say a word.

"Good night," Fuyutsuki said, grabbing hold of the ramp's railing.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump. My heartbeat was so loud.

"Night," I mumbled to Fuyutsuki. But all I could do was watch her walk away.

I could still feel the sensation from earlier on my lips, and a sweet scent came from them, presumably left behind by her lipstick.

*

"So that's what happened," I concluded, having summarized the events of that fateful evening.

"Damn you, livin' yer best life," Narumi grumbled, his pupils dilated.

Hayase, meanwhile, shouted, "That ain't the way I thought it'd play out!" in a fake Kansai accent, and lay face down on the table. "How come *you* weren't the one to chase after *her*?!"

"Is that really what's important here?"

"Well, whatever. Just give me a sec to calm down," Hayase said, before looking up at me with a stern look in her eyes. "Isn't the guy supposed to be the

one to confess his feelings, though?"

"Sure, but we live in a genderless world nowadays," chimed in Narumi. "Sorano's got his own way of doin' things."

"But he took her to his room and still didn't make a move."

"I couldn't have."

"Why not?"

"I mean, Fuyutsuki can't see."

"What?!" exclaimed Hayase, infuriated. I must have hit a nerve. "You couldn't make a move on her because she's disabled?"

"Huh? That's not what I meant!"

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about that in the past, but I still felt like Hayase was getting the wrong idea.

"Y'all need to calm down!" said Narumi in an attempt to defuse the situation. His voice was louder than both Hayase's and mine, though, and it reverberated around the restaurant, attracting glances from nearby customers. When Narumi realized, he apologized to the room.

"Explain, Sorano," he said, turning things back to our previous conversation.

"Well, Fuyutsuki…"

"Yes?" said Hayase.

She was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed and a grouchy look on her face. Every now and then, she'd interject in a low voice.

"She's blind…"

"Uh-huh."

"So I thought she'd be scared."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean, she'd be scared if I suddenly just touched her. And if I started chasing after her or something, that'd *really* freak her out."

Hayase's eyes widened hearing that. She started laughing and clapping her hands.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha."

"Hey, ya don't have to laugh so hard," said Narumi.

"But he's just so innocent," responded Hayase between bouts of laughter.

Even Narumi, who'd been quietly sitting there with his arms crossed so far, started chuckling. His whole body shook with laughter.

"Are you making fun of me?" I said.

"Not at all."

"'Course not."

Their voices overlapped, and the pair exchanged glances with a snicker.

"You so are!"

The two of them burst out laughing, clutching on to their stomachs. I honestly wished they'd go to hell.

"Just let me ask you one thing," said Hayase. "What do you like about Koharu?"

"Like I'd tell you."

"Oh? It must be her face or her figure, then. Gross. Koharu doesn't deserve a guy like that."

"It's not that."

I downed the rest of my oolong tea.

"She always has a smile on her face."

"Oh?" said Hayase, propping her elbows up on the table. She looked at me with a gentle smile.

"If I lost my sight…"

"Yeah?"

"I doubt I could be that positive."

"I get that."

"I mean…"

"Mm?"

"I couldn't even stay positive when my parents got divorced."

"Oh yeah?"

"I couldn't stop feeling sorry for myself, wondering why I had to suffer when it wasn't my fault."

"Oh… Right."

"Fuyutsuki is so much freer than someone like me, who spends all their time trying to gauge people's expressions. It's incredible, really. I feel like she has everything I lack. She's taught me that happiness depends on your mindset."

Maybe it was the alcohol that was making me blurt out my true feelings, but I didn't really mind.

"I hear you," said Hayase.

"I really like her."

She made a whistling sound, teasing me, but I ignored it.

"She's made me realize it's what's on the inside that counts."

Hayase looked at me with a kind expression on her face.

"I know what you mean," she said. "Koharu has been like that the whole time I've known her. She dresses nicely every day, she dragged you out because she

wanted to set off fireworks, and she attends all her lectures. She never uses her eyesight as an excuse for anything. Even I oversleep sometimes, and I haven't got any way to justify it! She's seriously incredible."

Hayase had a distant look in her eyes, and I figured she was picturing her friend's face in her mind. I had a feeling that even in her imagination, Fuyutsuki would be smiling.

"It's hard to explain, so I'm not too sure how to put this," Hayase continued. "She's always honest with herself and straightforward. She's the complete opposite of me, so I totally get why you admire her. Koharu's just cool, isn't she?"

I could tell Hayase was trying to convey how incredible Fuyutsuki was.

It was Fuyutsuki's eagerness to pursue whatever she wanted and her refusal to make excuses for herself that drew me to her.

That was probably what impressed Hayase, too.

At that point, Narumi slapped his knee and spoke up.

"All right. You gotta tell her how ya feel, then."

"I don't know about that…"

"Why not? It's the perfect moment!" Hayase urged.

"…In what way?" I asked.

"Figures it'd be too high of a bar for ya," Narumi said with a sigh.

"It's not that."

"Are you *sure* you like her?" Hayase asked, trying to provoke me.

"Of course!"

"I get why you're havin' trouble working up the courage. I mean, she is blind and all," said Narumi with another dramatic sigh.

"I told you, that's not the issue!"

"Do you *actually* like her, though?" asked Hayase again.

"What? Fine, I'll tell her."

"When?" countered Hayase.

"I dunno."

"Okay, then do it now. Even if it's just practice. We'll film it."

"…Practice?"

"Oh, I get it now. You're all talk and no action. Poor Koharu."

A sound like blood vessels bursting reverberated around the inside of my head.

I tilted my glass toward me to take a swig, but it was empty. I put some ice in my mouth, crunched it up, and swallowed. Then I rose to my feet and yelled

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loud enough for the entire restaurant to hear.

"Attention, everyone!"

They all turned to look at me.

I saw pair after pair of curious eyes.

I hesitated for a moment, but there was no turning back now.

"I have an important announcement to make!"

I felt like that sleazebag who'd asked Hayase out at the welcome party. The restaurant fell silent, and everyone kept their eyes fixed on me…except for one table, where someone was pouring a fresh batch of batter onto the griddle in front of them. I could hear the sizzling sound, and the smell of the sauce drifted toward me. I knew I didn't look cool, but there was no stopping now.

"I, Kakeryu Sorano—"

"Oh, you messed up your own name," Hayase interjected.

"Yeah, for real," added Narumi.

I was hoping to make a once-in-a-lifetime confession, but thanks to the alcohol, I'd ended up tripping over my words. The looks Narumi and Hayase were giving me clearly said *You messed up*, and a wave of embarrassment came over me, making me feel like I was about to cry.

Damn it. I'm gonna do it. I'm just gonna go ahead and say it.

"I, Kakeru Sorano, like Koharu Fuyutsukiiiii! I want to go out with herrrrr!"

Silence enveloped the room. It felt as though the tide had gone out.

And then…

"Whooooooooooooo!"

People started to clap, and the restaurant filled with thunderous applause.

"That's youth for you!" one customer shouted out to me.

"Go out with me, too!" another man jeered, leaving me baffled.

"Is that good enough for you?" I asked Narumi.

He was sitting right in front of me, looking stunned.

"Uh, yeah. Pretty gutsy of ya, man."

Hayase giggled and fiddled with her phone, which had been pointed in my direction. Then, for some inexplicable reason, she turned the screen toward me.

"I sent that to Koharu."

"What?"

I looked at Hayase's phone; sure enough, she'd sent a video to a person named Koharu.

Huh? What?

I rubbed my eyes and took another look at the screen.

She’d sent a video to Koharu—and the message had been read.

“Are you serious?”

“Very serious,” said Hayase, before bursting into laughter.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” I snapped, but Hayase just continued to laugh.

Narumi joined in, as did some of the other customers, and I wanted the ground to swallow me up.

Several days went by.

There was still no response from Fuyutsuki.

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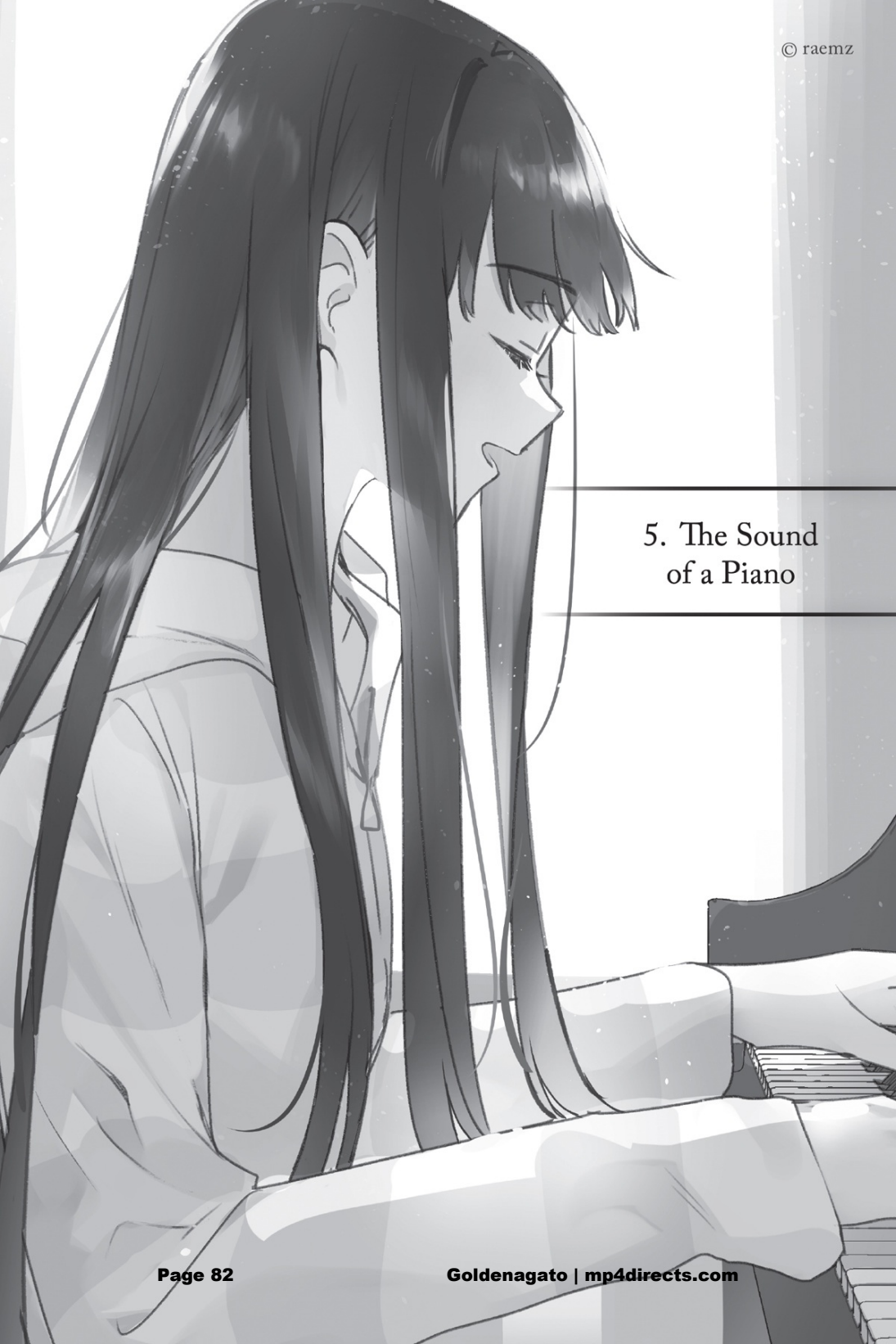

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“This small white spot is a malignant tumor,” explained the doctor.

It didn’t feel like he was talking about me. The only symptoms I’d been experiencing were fatigue and headaches; nothing that severe.

The tumor was about the size of my pinkie nail, so the surgery didn’t take long.

It was a simple procedure that didn’t even require a scalpel. It was over in no time.

It seemed like a piece of cake, and I assumed the whole ordeal was behind me.

A few years later, however, they found that the cancer had moved.

“We need to start chemotherapy.”

Those few words from the doctor marked the beginning of my nightmare.

I had to inject myself with a powerful drug to stop the cancer cells from multiplying. The bad cells stopped growing, but normal cells slowed down, too.

What did that mean?

First, I was hit with severe nausea and diarrhea.

My hair fell out, so I started wearing a knitted hat, even when I was inside.

I started having trouble sleeping, which made me feel dazed.

My memories started getting hazy. Apparently, I was suffering from something called chemo brain.

I struggled to remember what had happened a few days earlier, or even the previous day.

Wait, what was I thinking about just now?

My thoughts were all over the place, and it drove me insane.

Gradually, even that feeling faded away, and I stopped thinking altogether. I became numb. I was totally out of it.

Then, out of nowhere, I was struck by an intense sense of anxiety. I spent almost every day crying by myself.

I was clearly depressed.

Why was I the only one who had to endure so much suffering?

I cursed my fate.

I cursed myself.
I started to think I'd be better off dead.
I thought about wrapping a towel around my neck.
Jumping from a rooftop.
Cutting my wrists.
Biting my tongue off.
I thought about dying every single day.
But my family wouldn't let me think like that.
Stay alive.
Keep on living.
I shouldered the weight of their pleas alone.
Can you imagine what that's like?
How agonizing it is to have people wish for you to live, rather than die?
Oh. I see what this is.

It's a living hell.

*

Hayase had heard nothing from Fuyutsuki since sending her the video of my confession.

And if that wasn't bad enough, I hadn't seen Fuyutsuki in a week. It wasn't because I felt too embarrassed or awkward to face her—I literally hadn't seen her.

Narumi and Hayase were in the same boat, and we'd been keeping in frequent contact.

Yuuko: Have either of you guys heard from Fuyutsuki?
Ushio: Nothing here
Sorano: Same

I messaged her Hey, but she left it unread.
Unsurprisingly, she wouldn't answer my calls, either.
I couldn't contact her on LINE or over the phone.
Nor was she coming to school.
What in the world was going on?

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I was apprehensive beyond words.

Fuyutsuki hadn't been at our first-period lecture that Monday. The terrace where we usually went was empty, too. The area was silent, as though Koharu Fuyutsuki had never existed at all.

I was sitting alone on the terrace, drinking soda from a bottle and watching the clouds drift by. The sweet drink fizzed on my tongue and ran down my throat.

Every Monday after first period, the pair of us would kill time on the student center terrace.

I'd assumed we'd carry on doing that forever.

Fuyutsuki would sit by my side drinking sugary milk tea while I'd eat an early lunch from the university cafeteria. We'd chat about nothing, and Fuyutsuki would laugh.

For some reason, I'd thought things would always stay that way.

"Where are you, Fuyutsuki?"

I remembered her telling me once that she didn't like soda.

"Remember how I told you that vending machines are like Russian roulette for me? I don't drink carbonated drinks, so whenever I end up with one, it makes me feel like my throat is burning."

I thought about that as I watched the clouds float by.

A single fluffy cloud slowly drifted from right to left. Birds were singing, and I could hear the cheerful voices of girls walking through the campus.

"Ahhh, I wish I could hear her voice."

The words had slipped out unconsciously, and as I realized what I'd said, a wave of embarrassment crept over me.

I pulled out my phone and opened LINE to distract myself.

Sorano: Are you coming to class today?

The message I'd sent the day before was still marked as unread. Was she ignoring me? Had she blocked me? Unpleasant thoughts bubbled up inside me. It was as if there was something stuck in my throat making it hard to breathe. My heart ached, and my chest felt tight.

"What is this? Heartbreak?"

I couldn't shake the idea that it was something else.

I had a bad feeling that something more serious had happened to Fuyutsuki, and a vague sense of apprehension seized hold of me.

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That was why I wanted to see her—to make sure she hadn't disappeared.

People you cared about could vanish in the blink of an eye, as if they'd never been there at all.

That was what had happened with my father. Before I knew it, he was gone, never to be seen again.

It felt as if someone had said, "If she means that much to you, I'll take her away," then torn out something hidden deep inside me.

What had I done wrong? What did I do to deserve this?

"…I must have done some pretty terrible things in my past life."

I was so distressed that all I could do was cling to concepts beyond my control, like past lives and fate.

I hung my head, on the verge of tears.

"Good morning."

As I was staring at an ant on the asphalt below, I heard Hayase's voice.

I looked up to see her standing there with a gloomy look on her face.

"You okay, Hayase?"

Her complexion worried me. Maybe it was her makeup, or maybe it was the dark circles under her eyes, but she looked like an extremely sick panda.

"I never thought I'd see you looking so down in the dumps, Hayase."

"You think I look strong?"

"All leader types look strong to me."

"Believe it or not, I'm a real softy."

Sure enough, Hayase was slumped over at such an angle that it looked like her spine had turned to jelly.

"I take it Koharu's not here."

There was always a chance that Fuyutsuki would suddenly appear out of the blue, saying "Did I worry you? Heh-heh-heh" with a smile. Perhaps Hayase had been clinging on to that sliver of hope, too. I understood how she felt.

"Maybe it's because I sent her that weird video," she said.

"What d'you mean 'weird'?

"I was making fun of your confession."

"Oh, so you *did* mean it like that."

Hayase probably wasn't used to people disappearing. Unlike her, I was accustomed to grown-ups coming in and out of my life, so I wasn't as affected by it as she was.

No, that was a lie.

Correction: Fuyutsuki's disappearance was *very* tough on me.

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“I wonder what happened to her,” I said.

“Who knows?” Hayase replied simply.

“……”

“……”

The conversation came to a grinding halt.

“Anyway, about the midterm exams,” I began, forcing myself to say something. “Can we get past papers from our seniors?”

“Yeah, they’re usually the people to ask.”

“Could you photocopy yours for me? I’ll treat you to some snacks from the student center.”

“Sure.”

I’d expected Hayase to complain about what a poor trade-off that was, but her head was in the clouds. She didn’t react to my attempt at a joke, probably because she was too busy worrying about Fuyutsuki. Instead, she just stared blankly at a line of ants on the ground.

Then, I heard someone call out.

“Sorano!”

It was Narumi.

He was running over to us, waving. His burly build made him look like a rugby player, and the other people on campus tried to get out of his way when they saw him coming. If he collided with them, they wouldn’t get knocked over so much as *run* over.

Narumi came to a stop and tried to catch his breath with his hands on his knees.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Why are you running?” said Hayase.

“*Haah… Haah…* I…ran here…from Tsukishima,” he said, delivering the information in fragments between pants.

It sounded like he’d run all the way here from Tsukishima Station, over half a mile away. There probably should be a law to prevent people as brawny as him from running on the sidewalk.

Just as I was about to make a joke about that, Narumi said something completely unexpected.

“I saw Fuyutsuki.”

The moment he said that, Hayase and I exchanged a look.

“Where?”

“She was walking from Shintomicho and went into a big hospital.”

The word *hospital* sent a sudden chill down my spine.

I couldn't help but think of Fuyutsuki's past.

Her cancer. The cancer spreading. Being hospitalized.

Had she gotten sick again? My brain started to heat up.

I needed to see her. Nothing else mattered.

"Thanks. I'm gonna go see her."

"I'll come with you," said Hayase, holding on tightly to my shirt sleeve.

"What about you, Narumi?"

"Sorry… I've got a compulsory class I can't skip."

"That's okay, the two of us will go!" I told him.

By then, Hayase and I were already running.

"You know where you're headin'?" Narumi shouted after us.

I looked behind me, waving my phone.

"Don't worry—I'll check the map! Thanks!"

"Be careful!"

We ran as fast as we could until we were out of breath, then switched to speed-walking, and eventually started running again. My sides hurt, and I could taste blood. My lungs were aching. I didn't care, though—none of it mattered. I just wanted to see Fuyutsuki as soon as possible. The thought of seeing her even a second faster made it all feel worth it.

*

Shintomicho was one subway stop from Tsukishima Station. We debated whether or not to take the subway but decided to run instead. It felt like that would be quicker than going down and waiting for a train.

Hayase was wearing heels, so she had to tap out almost as soon as we started running. "Go on ahead," she told me, so I ran off by myself.

I could see the large hospital from Tsukuda Bridge.

At that point, I was totally worn out. I'd probably run two kilometers by that point. The hospital looked like a magnificent fort, with a combination of both low-rise and high-rise sections.

Whoa. It even has a rooftop garden.

It was exactly what you'd imagine a major city hospital to be like.

When I went in through the first-floor entrance, I was greeted by the aroma of coffee rather than the usual hospital smell. The luxurious atmosphere left me in a state of disbelief; there was a coffee shop belonging to a certain green chain

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of stores, restaurants, and for some reason, even an art gallery. It felt like a high-end hotel. I felt completely out of place.

I started to wonder if the reception staff would be dressed like hotel concierges—but the reception ended up being pretty ordinary.

"Uh…excuse…me. Can I…ask you…something?" I said, panting heavily.

"O-of course. Is this your first appointment here?" asked the receptionist, slightly flustered by my breathlessness.

"Is there a patient…named Fuyutsuki…in this hospital? Koharu Fuyutsuki?"

The receptionist started eyeing me suspiciously. "I'm sorry, but that's personal information."

"Please. I haven't been able to contact her lately."

I was desperate. I knew I was being stupid, but I couldn't stop myself. I needed her to know. I needed this lady to tell her I wanted to see her—to tell Koharu Fuyutsuki.

"…I'm afraid that doesn't change things."

Somebody who looked like the receptionist's boss came over, a smile pasted on her face.

It was obvious that this was the smile she saved for suspicious individuals.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"Sorry. It's fine," I replied—but it really wasn't.

For the time being, I turned around and walked away from the reception.

I knew how ridiculous my behavior was, but that didn't make me any less desperate.

At that moment, the floor underneath me began to sway.

My vision started to turn white; there must not have been enough oxygen getting to my brain. Unable to stay standing, I slumped into a chair in the lobby. When was the last time I'd run that hard?

An electronic chime sounded and a voice said, "Number one hundred and seven, please."

It had occurred to me that if I sat in the lobby long enough, Fuyutsuki's name might be called out—but it sounded like they referred to patients by numbers instead. It didn't seem like I was going to hear her name, no matter how long I sat around with my head down.

"Where are you?" I muttered to myself.

I got out my phone and opened LINE.

The message I'd sent her the day before was still unopened.

Fuyutsuki. Fuyutsuki. Fuyutsuki.

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All I could hear inside my head was her name.

"Sorano!"

Hayase had finally arrived at the hospital lobby.

"Did you take the train?" I asked.

"No, I caught a taxi."

Her expression was rigid. I could tell she'd hurried here.

"So? Where's Koharu?"

"Reception won't tell me anything."

"You idiot. Of course they won't! But okay. I see."

There was a determined look on Hayase's face.

"We have no choice but to search for her ourselves. I'll take the old building next door. Let me know if you find her."

With that, Hayase made her way to the old building, and I set off to look for Fuyutsuki.

The hospital was twelve stories high, and I slowly worked my way from floor to floor. I didn't want to attract suspicion, so I made a conscious effort not to stare and tried to make it look as though I was on my way to a particular room. The luxurious facade from earlier melted away the higher up I went, as the distinct stench of disinfectant became stronger.

I assumed the ophthalmology department would be the most likely place to find her. I looked for someone who was using a white cane, but she wasn't there.

Fuyutsuki. Fuyutsuki. Fuyutsuki.

The entire time, all I could think of was her name.

I'd still heard nothing from Hayase.

Where are you?!

With each second that ticked by, I grew more worried. When I reached the pediatric floor, I almost turned back, thinking it was unlikely I'd find her there.

That was when I heard it.

♫

I could hear the sound of a piano. A gentle melody filled the hospital hallway, and my heart raced hearing the familiar tune. An image of Fuyutsuki's profile as she played the piano drifted across the back of my mind.

This must have been the so-called Kids' Room. The walls were covered in pastel-blue wallpaper, and there was a soft-looking yellow-and-green jigsaw mat on the floor. The shelves on the walls were packed full of toys and picture

books. There were about ten kids there, and three women who must have been mothers gazed lovingly at their children. There, in the Kids' Room, I saw an upright piano with a white cane leaning against the keys.

My heart skipped a beat.

Fuyutsuki was playing the piano. She was putting her whole body into it, and her long hair swayed from side to side as her fingers flowed across the keys.

What was that song? It was something they performed regularly in churches.

"What a friend we have in Jesus. ♪"

The voice singing had an airy, gentle quality to it, with the singer stretching out their notes like a true professional. All the kids started to sing along in unison. The moment I heard Fuyutsuki's voice, I felt a surge of relief from the ends of my toes to the tips of my fingers. I felt like I was going to topple over.

I'd found her. I'd finally found her.

Thank God.

She hadn't disappeared after all. I was so glad she wasn't gone.

"All our sins and griefs to bear! ♪"

Not noticing I was there, Fuyutsuki continued sing in a carefree tone, her voice as clear as a bell.

I couldn't believe how good she was.

"Ha-ha. Ah-ha-ha."

Quiet laughter escaped my lips as my vision began to blur. My tear ducts were hot, and my cheeks felt damp.

I took out my phone to share the news with Hayase.

Sorano: She's here
Yuuko: Where?!
Sorano: The Kids' Room in the pediatrics ward
Yuuko: What's she doing there?
Sorano: Singing for the children

Then Hayase sent me a sticker I'd never seen before. Looking at it, though, I couldn't for the life of me figure out how she was feeling.

I met up with Hayase, and we waited together for Fuyutsuki to come out.

She must have spent fifteen minutes singing to the kids.

"Thank you!" they all shouted when she left, and Fuyutsuki told them she'd

see them again soon.

"Let's go," I said to Hayase. She nodded and followed behind me.

What were we meant to say to Fuyutsuki? It had only been a week, but I felt like we hadn't seen each other in years.

My heart was racing. *This is crazy. What am I going to say?*

"Fuyutsuki!"

The sound of my voice startled her.

Seeing her react like that, something felt off.

"Sorry, Fuyutsuki. It's me, Sorano. I'm right behind you."

I knew people were supposed to say their names when they were calling out to her. I'd done that when we'd been first getting to know each other, but she'd gradually grown accustomed to me, and eventually Fuyutsuki had learned to recognize me from my voice alone.

But this time, she hadn't.

She hadn't said, "Oh, Kakeru," in that carefree way she usually did.

When she turned around, she looked frightened.

I was nervous. All the blood in my body felt as if it had frozen, and my throat was dry.

I made a joke to try to disguise my anxiety.

"Excuse me, miss, but we've been searching everywhere for you. May we have a moment of your time?"

Usually, Fuyutsuki would have laughed and gone along with it, saying something like "Who's asking?" or "You've got the wrong person!" or some other sort of nonsensical reply to my dumb joke.

This time, however, all she said was "Okay."

What was going on? There was something weird about her reply and her tone of voice.

The rooftop garden was on the floor above the Kids' Room, so Fuyutsuki, Hayase, and I decided to go there.

Hayase tried to lend Fuyutsuki her arm, but she declined and walked there by herself, holding on to the railing.

We were on top of the building, yet there were trees and a neatly trimmed lawn. A smattering of the azaleas had red flowers blooming from them, and there was a green archway in front of us leading to a bench on the other side.

We got Fuyutsuki to sit down on the bench. She was wearing fluffy pastel-colored pajamas.

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We were finally face-to-face again, but I still didn't know where to begin.

In the end, I decided to hide my deep affection for her and start simple.

"It's been a while."

Hayase was sitting next to Fuyutsuki, and she took her by the hand.

"We've been so worried about you. Why haven't we been able to get in touch with you?"

Fuyutsuki seemed to tense up, assumably because Hayase had grabbed her hand out of nowhere.

There was something strange going on.

Then Fuyutsuki opened her mouth and spoke.

"Um…"

Her next words filled me with despair.

"Have we met somewhere before?"

It was as if she'd never even met us.

Hayase looked stunned, and her eyes widened in astonishment. A quiet "No way" escaped her lips, and she glanced toward me.

Obviously, I couldn't believe what I was hearing, either.

Without meaning to, my tone became more forceful.

"Are you being serious right now?"

"Eek!" Fuyutsuki let out a short, fearful cry.

Someone whose facial expressions she couldn't see had spoken to her in a threatening tone of voice. Of course she'd be scared.

"Sorry," I said.

I apologized a second time, so softly only I could hear it, as if admonishing myself.

At long last, we'd been reunited.

So what the heck was going on?

My heart was racing. I felt lightheaded. I closed my eyes and looked up at the sky. The sun was blazing down on us, making me feel dizzy. In that moment, stomach acid came rushing back up my throat.

"This…isn't a joke, is it?" I asked again.

I'd hoped that would settle it. If it *was* a joke, this was where it would end. I was praying for it to end.

"*What* isn't a joke?"

She wasn't joking.

“More to the point, who *are* you? I’m going to call for help.”

She really wasn’t.

Confronted with the reality of the situation, Hayase began to tear up.

“All right, then.”

The words formed naturally on my tongue.

Once I’d accepted this was how things were, my nerves actually began to settle.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Kakeru Sorano, and this is Hayase—”

*

After talking to Fuyutsuki, I decided to return to the dorm for a while.

It was evening by the time we left the hospital, and the Sumida River was tinted orange underneath Tsukuda Bridge. It wasn’t fully dark, but nevertheless, the streetlights on the bridge were already on. I must have looked extremely depressed, because a toy poodle that was out on a walk barked at me.

Feeling helpless, I picked up a small stone that was lying on the ground and threw it into the river from the bridge.

“I wanna try, too,” said Hayase.

With tears in her eyes, she also picked up a stone and threw it into the water.

I grabbed another one so we could throw them in together, and our two pebbles met the surface with a *plop*. Ripples creased the surface of the water—but they were just too small. My heart was in turmoil, while the surface of the water before me was so incredibly calm; no matter how many stones I threw in, it would always stay that way. I couldn’t stand how tranquil it looked after what had happened to Fuyutsuki.

I remembered something I’d said a long time ago:

“I don’t even want to cause the tiniest ripple.”

The change in me was a testament to how attached I’d gotten, and suddenly I let out a yell.

“Aaargh!”

Hayase joined in as she continued to throw stones.

This time, the chihuahua started barking at us.

“Are you two all right?” asked the middle-aged man walking the dog.

He didn’t say this out of concern but to make sure we wouldn’t harm anyone. He was holding his phone in one hand and looked primed to call for help at any time.

So we ran away.

Hayase came back to my dorm room with me.

It wasn't something we'd decided on, exactly. I'd just been in a daze, and by the time I'd snapped out of it, we were standing in front of the dorm.

The moment I opened the door, I was hit by the strong smell of garlic. Apparently, Narumi had been making gyoza.

"Hey. Ya want some?"

He seemed so carefree it almost made me cry.

"It stinks!" Hayase snapped angrily, her voice laden with tears.

There were fifty gyoza dumplings laid out on the round table in the middle of the room.

"Okay, let's go through everything that happened."

Narumi dipped a dumpling in vinegared soy sauce, then stuffed it into his mouth along with some rice.

"On Shunday, Fuwuchuki and Sowano…," Narumi began.

"Swallow your food before you speak," I said.

"How is this idiot so laid-back?" remarked Hayase.

She placed the tips of her fingers to her temples. Narumi swallowed with an audible gulp.

"All right. Let's recap," he said.

Fuyutsuki and I had kissed after the student festival on Sunday.

"So Monday. None of you guys saw her, did ya?"

"Nope," I said with a shake of my head. "She wasn't in our lecture, either."

"Then, on Sunday night, I sent her that confession video from the *monja* restaurant," said Hayase with her arms crossed.

There'd been no sign of Fuyutsuki for a week after that, and she'd been impossible to contact. And when we finally met up again, she'd acted like she lost her memories.

"I told her we were friends, but she kept denying it."

"Doesn't she have a phone? All she needs to do is check her LINE messages, and she'd know ya were tellin' the truth."

"I thought the same thing," Hayase said. "So I asked her to show us her phone, but…"

"What happened?" asked Narumi, seeing Hayase hesitate.

"Her phone screen was all smashed up," I explained.

"Yeah." Hayase nodded. "The screen was totally destroyed; it had a whole web of cracks in it. Koharu said, 'I can make calls, but it's hard for me to operate

the screen!' She missed the point, but it *did* sound like something Koharu would say."

Narumi laughed loudly and slapped his thigh.

"It sure does."

"This is no laughing matter!" shouted Hayase. She was sitting with her legs to the side, and she almost rose to her feet in anger.

"I know things ain't lookin' too bright, but gettin' all annoyed won't help anything."

"If you'd actually seen her, you wouldn't be saying that." A sob escaped Hayase. "I just feel bad for Koharu."

"Hey now, there's no need to cry," said Narumi.

I understood why she was crying. It'd really stung when Fuyutsuki had said, *"Who are you?"* with that innocent look on her face.

It felt like everything we'd been through had been wiped clean.

We'd had so much fun. We'd laughed so much. We'd done so many exciting things together.

I couldn't just say "Oh, okay then" and accept that all of that had been lost.

What on earth had happened? How had Fuyutsuki ended up like that?

She'd done everything she could to go to college, even after suffering from a painful disease and losing her eyesight. If there was a god out there putting her through even *more* excruciating challenges…then they were just too cruel.

"Come on, now—there's no point cryin'," said Narumi. "We wanna do somethin' about it, right?"

"What are we supposed to do?" asked Hayase.

"There must be something…"

"Sure, but *what*?!" she shouted hysterically.

"……"

"……"

"……"

All three of us fell silent, and the rough laughter of some guys in the hallway reverberated through the wall.

Narumi slowly rose to his feet.

"Well, let's just do whatever we can."

He started rummaging through the pre-prepared food on top of the refrigerator.

"You guys want some miso soup?"

"Are you our mom or what?" I retorted in my usual manner.

“There’s tons of rice there, so help yourself to seconds,” he added.

“You really *do* sound like our mom.”

At long last, a laugh escaped Hayase’s lips.

“Don’t make me laugh, Sorano.”

“Well, crying’s not going to do you any good.”

“Why are *you* being so laid-back about this now, Sorano?”

“You really think I don’t care about this? *Seriously?* You’ve gotta be kidding me!” I yelled, suddenly losing my cool.

Narumi spread his hands, trying to dispel the tension.

“Come on, why don’t we just eat up those gyoza before they get cold, yeah?”

“No. I don’t want any,” Hayase said sulkily.

It seemed like I’d gone too far.

“There’s no point in us fightin’,” said Narumi. “C’mon, have some gyoza.”

“Sure, *Mom*,” Hayase retorted feebly as she reluctantly put one in her mouth. “…These are great.”

“Right?”

Narumi grinned smugly, and after giving him a resentful glare, Hayase kept going, demolishing one dumpling after another. For someone who’d been so reluctant to eat, she seemed to have quite the appetite.

“Hey, don’t eat them all.”

“Don’t boss me around. I get hungry when I’m in a bad mood. Do you have anything else besides gyoza?”

“Now that I think about it, didn’t you get some sausages from back home?” I asked Narumi.

I glanced toward the refrigerator, but Narumi melodramatically blocked my view and cried out “Noooo!” His unique Kansai sense of humor was on full display.

“But those are my favorite! They’re called swirly sausages ’cause they’re coiled up like a spiral!”

“Hey, they sound delicious. Come on, get them out. Don’t be stingy.”

Hayase grabbed Narumi by the shoulders, trying to pull him away from the fridge, but Narumi resisted, shaking his head from side to side.

“Nuh-uh. No way.”

I watched them, clutching my stomach with laughter.

Before coming to college, I’d never imagined myself having so much fun with friends. Cooking gyoza, worrying, crying, arguing, and trying to work things out on our own.

Maybe our way of thinking was naive. Maybe we were only capable of coming up with clumsy solutions. But even so, this desperation of ours didn’t seem all that bad.

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*

From that point on, we never saw Fuyutsuki at college again.

I found out that she always sang to the children at the hospital at around two PM.

The walls, hallways, and staff uniforms of the hospital were all white, and everything smelled like disinfectant. In contrast, the Kids' Room was decorated in pastel colors, which created a surreal atmosphere that made it feel worlds away from the rest of the hospital.

Through the glass, I watched Fuyutsuki singing happily as she played the piano.

Not even the sight of the children playing and singing brought me any comfort.

Watching Fuyutsuki only filled me with a sense of unease.

She was always wearing fluffy pajamas, which suggested she was a patient there.

I couldn't bring myself to talk to her.

Had she really forgotten everything?

It was so hard to accept. Couldn't this all be a joke? A lie? An act? I couldn't let go of that possibility. I was grasping at straws.

Which was why I eventually decided to speak to her.

"Hey," I said—but she completely ignored me.

It was as though she hadn't heard me at all. She didn't even notice I was there. It hurt so bad. It was so painful. I wished I was dead. I was filled with regret. I felt more and more like I wanted to die.

At the same time, though, I felt like I wanted to be near Fuyutsuki.

I'm such a weirdo, I thought, chiding myself.

I couldn't believe someone like me, who'd never had any attachments, was clinging on so tightly to Fuyutsuki.

*

It happened during lunch break.

I'd picked the minced meat cutlet set meal, Narumi had chosen a large serving of *katsu* curry, and Hayase had ordered tempura soba. It was the busiest time of the day for the cafeteria, and we were holding our trays, looking for an empty table in the crowded room.

We finally found seats, but as soon as I took a bite of my meal, I regretted ordering so much food. I hadn't worked up that much of an appetite.

"Hey, look at this," Hayase said, loud enough to be heard over the hubbub of the cafeteria.

She showed us her phone screen. It read "Student Volunteer Wanted."

"You're not doing more volunteer work, are you?" asked Narumi, stuffing his mouth with curry.

He made it sound as if Hayase was addicted to volunteering.

"Read the whole thing," she said.

"It's for *that* hospital?"

"Yeah! They're asking for somebody to help entertain the children in the Kids' Room. They'd have to read books and do picture-story shows."

I felt like a ray of hope had just shone through the clouds.

This could be my chance to get close to Fuyutsuki.

As that thought crossed my mind, I caught a whiff of the sauce covering my minced meat cutlet and suddenly felt hungry.

"Why don't we go for it?"

"We might get to talk to Koharu."

"But you know," Narumi said, still shoveling food into his mouth, "if we go in wid ulcheeria mochives…"

"Swallow your food before you talk."

Narumi swallowed hard, then started his sentence again.

"If we go in with ulterior motives, we won't get past the interview."

He made a good point.

"If I'm going to do this, I intend to give it my all, regardless of Koharu," Hayase declared earnestly.

Gone was the sensitive and frail panda-like version of Hayase I'd seen the other day. She gazed at me with a dignified look on her face.

"Let's just apply. I mean, we already found Koharu."

I found myself responding with a slightly excited "Yeah." I couldn't stop these feelings welling up inside me.

No matter how much we discussed it, we had no other options.

The answer was obvious.

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If I could be near Fuyutsuki, that was all that mattered.

That thought rose up from deep inside my chest, sending my brain into a stupor.

The back of my nose felt hot. I could tell how excited I was.

The next day, Hayase, Narumi, and I decided to apply for the student volunteer position at the hospital.

*

All three of us passed the interview without any trouble. Our university's reputation, not to mention the help we received from volunteering fanatic Hayase, played a big part in that.

However, passing the interview didn't mean we could just start the next day. There were lots of clerical tasks we had to complete, such as filling out forms, getting antibody tests done, and buying volunteer insurance.

We also had to attend an orientation session where they taught us about volunteering. The hospital instructed us on how to avoid upsetting the children—we weren't allowed to discuss their illnesses, for example—and taught us the proper way to wash our hands to prevent the spread of infection.

One thing a nurse told us during the orientation really struck a chord with me.

"This is a tough job, but please keep at it."

That was when I realized this volunteering gig wasn't going to be a cakewalk.

On our first day as volunteers, the three of us were joined by two older women who seemed to live nearby.

There were thirteen kids in total. Some had arm injuries, others had leg casts, and a few wore knitted hats. They ranged in age from about five to nine years old.

According to one of the nurses, children who stay long-term in the hospital's pediatric ward often have serious illnesses. We were clearly instructed not to mention their ailments, as the time we spent with them was meant to help the kids forget the hardships of their hospital stay—even if only for a little while.

The Kids' Room was filled with excited squeals. That day, we were all doing origami.

"Roar!"

Or at least, we were *supposed* to be doing origami. Instead, Narumi was surrounded by a group of boys who were climbing on his back and kicking him.

“Could you pass me that origami book?”

Hayase, meanwhile, was surrounded by girls. She could have just made simple things like planes or cranes, but instead, she was staring at the book and trying to fold things like roses and lilies that were beyond her skill level.

At the hospital, the children’s playtime was called Kids’ Time. These sessions were held on a daily basis to make sure they never got bored in the hospital.

Before we started, the nurse in charge had introduced me to Fuyutsuki.

“She plays the piano during Kids’ Time, but she also happens to be one of our patients.”

The moment the nurse said Fuyutsuki was a patient, my entire body tensed up. I had suspected as much, but hearing it said so plainly made me feel like a weight had settled on my chest.

Fuyutsuki seemed a little taken aback when the nurse told her that some more student volunteers would be joining.

“Nice to meet you,” I said to her.

“Nice to meet you, too,” she responded quietly.

Fuyutsuki pursed her lips tightly. It was as if the lively, cheerful Fuyutsuki I’d met at college had never existed at all.

“Ooh, I wonder if I can make one, too.”

Surrounded by a group of children, Fuyutsuki made origami guided by touch. The kids stuck by her side, seemingly drawn to her gentle voice.

She was folding paper airplanes. They were simple enough to make, even for someone who couldn’t see. As soon as she finished one airplane, she’d hand it to a child—but they’d just throw it through the air and demand another, making it hard for her to keep up.

It looked like she was about to run out of paper, so I silently placed more next to her.

I figured she probably wouldn’t notice with her lack of sight.

I was wrong.

“…Thank you,” she said.

Maybe she’d been counting the sheets with her fingertips. If she could count coins just by touching them, she could probably count sheets of origami paper the same way.

Her response was so unexpected that it filled me with joy.

I was so elated I couldn’t stop myself from talking to her.

“Want me to help with the paper airplanes? I bet you’re struggling to keep

up."

But just then…

"*Kancho*!" came a voice from behind me as I felt an electric shock shoot all the way from my bottom up into my brain.

"Owwwwwwww!"

I couldn't help but scream.

I turned around to see a little boy with a shaved head grinning mischievously.

He'd poked me in the butt.

"…You can't do that. It really hurts… It's not allowed."

"You were staring at that girl, weren't you? Ew, gross!" said the boy.

"I—I was not," I protested.

"Liar! I know! You were looking at her boobs, weren't you?"

I glanced at Fuyutsuki. Her face was bright red, and she was covering her chest.

"I wasn't. Of course I wasn't. I'd never do that!"

"Liar, liar, pants on fire!"

"You can't make fun of grown-ups like that," I scolded him, but the boy just seemed to find that funny, too.

"Boobies! Boobies! Boobies!" he yelled, running around the room.

"Hey! Stop running—it's dangerous!" I scolded him.

But all the other children had started to giggle, which only encouraged him to continue his chant.

Narumi blocked the boy's path and wrapped his arms around him.

"Gotcha."

"Let go of me, old man. I'm boiling!"

He struggled to break free from Narumi's arms. Meanwhile, Narumi seemed to be in shock, unable to believe the kid thought he looked old. He muttered "Old man" under his breath, followed by something short and unintelligible, before tensing up.

"If you start running again, Muscly Old Man's gonna catch ya," he warned the boy.

"Fine," the kid said meekly.

"Why am I calling myself Muscly Old Man?" asked Narumi.

"I reckon you'd be popular posting videos online with that name," I joked.

"'Today, we're gonna do two hundred push-ups. It's time to push yourself with Muscly Old Man.' Somethin' like that?"

"Nah, that sounds lame."

“Whaaat? Hmm, seems like my joke fell flat.”

“Like a lead balloon.”

“Come to think of it, what does Muscly Old Man even mean?”

“Hey, you two! Get back to folding origami,” Hayase scolded us.

“Okay!” Narumi and I replied in unison.

One of the older ladies who’d been listening in on our conversation smiled.

“You two sound like a comedy duo.”

That was the moment.

Fuyutsuki burst out laughing.

Her whole body was shaking with laughter.

It had been so long since I’d seen her laugh that seeing her like that triggered a wave of nostalgia.

I thought back to all the happy times we’d had together on the terrace; she looked just like the Fuyutsuki I’d known back then. My vision began to blur as tears welled up in my eyes.

After playing with the children for about two hours, we sent them back to their hospital rooms. As we were cleaning up the now-empty Kids’ Room, I overheard the volunteer staff talking to one another.

“Come to think of it, Sumire wasn’t here today, was she?”

“I heard she’s started her treatment.”

“Oh, that’s going to be so tough on her.”

Their conversation made my heart ache.

*

Two weeks had gone by since I’d started volunteering.

Every time I tried to talk to Fuyutsuki, our conversations never went anywhere. In fact, it felt like she was avoiding me.

June had come to a close, and the rainy season had finished earlier than it usually did. Summer was just around the corner.

I was doing Kids’ Time by myself that day. While I was tidying up, Fuyutsuki called out to me.

“Sorano, are you there?”

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. It was so unexpected that my pulse started to race, but at the same time, the fact that she’d called me by my last name instead of Kakeru filled me with despair.

I tried to respond as calmly as possible.

“Hmm? I’m here.”

“Is everything okay with college, Sorano?” she asked me.

“Okay in what way?”

“I mean, are you doing okay attendance-wise?”

“Oh, right. Don’t worry about that. Hayase’s covering for me.”

“I am pretty worried about you, you know?” said Fuyutsuki, her expression stern. It was a look I’d never really seen her make before.

“What about you, Fuyutsuki? Are you doing okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, are you coping okay with college?”

“College?” She looked puzzled. Then she lowered her voice. “I don’t go to college.”

The blood drained from my face; that wasn’t the response I’d been hoping for. My whole world turned dark.

Had Fuyutsuki…lost all her memories from that time in her life?

Hadn’t she gotten her high school equivalency diploma and worked hard to earn a place at college?

How had everything become so detached from reality?

“Don’t change the subject. We’re talking about *your* college studies right now, Sorano.”

I was exhausted.

My heart couldn’t take any more.

“Volunteering is a wonderful thing, but I don’t think you should neglect your main responsibilities.”

I didn’t want to think about it.

“……”

“……”

We were quiet for a moment.

Then her voice broke through the silence.

“Sorano?”

“Yeah?”

“I thought you had gone somewhere.”

“…I guess I went into my shell.”

I gave her my usual response.

I used to love it when Fuyutsuki would call me a meanie, pouting and feigning annoyance.

Those everyday interactions we’d had were so precious to me.

This time, however, things were different.

“Stop joking around.”

There was a sharpness to her voice.

“Are you even listening?” she asked grumpily, pouring salt on the wound.

I didn’t want to think. I wouldn’t think about it. Not anymore.

“I’m doing perfectly fine at college,” I insisted, my voice growing louder. I could tell the other volunteers were beginning to stare.

But…

Even so…

It was too much for me.

She’d forgotten everyone. She’d even forgotten what she’d worked so hard to obtain.

What was I supposed to say to her?

“Hey, what’s wrong?” asked Fuyutsuki, sounding uneasy.

She slowly reached out, feeling the space around her, and touched my shoulder. In the middle of my vision turning white, *she’d touched me*.

And yet I just brushed off Fuyutsuki’s fretful hand.

“It’s—”

I was just about to shout “It’s nothing!” when Fuyutsuki spoke up.

“Why don’t we talk outside, okay?”

She looked troubled, but she forced a smile anyway.

As I glanced around, I noticed that everyone was staring at *me*. I’d clearly seemed unstable.

“Sorry,” I said, but I wasn’t sure what I was apologizing for.

Still, I was sorry.

We left the Kids’ Room and headed up to the rooftop garden.

Fuyutsuki led me there, holding on to my arm and the railing. It had been so long since she’d touched me, and her hands felt so much colder than they had before.

As soon as we stepped out into the garden, I could almost feel myself choking from the mugginess of early summer.

Fuyutsuki walked along the promenade, running her hand along its railing. At the end of the path was a bench, and we sat down on it.

After taking a deep breath, Fuyutsuki began.

“Let’s go over everything.”

“Go over what?”

“I used to attend the same college as you and the others, right?”

“Yeah. You did.”

“So we know each other from there, but it seems like I’ve suddenly lost my memories.”

“Right.”

Fuyutsuki looked straight at me—or rather, toward the sound of my voice.

“To tell you the truth, I’m pretty shaken up. I don’t know what to do,” I told her.

“What do you want *me* to do?” Fuyutsuki countered. “Do you want me to remember you?”

“…Well…”

“Simply put, that would be a nuisance for me.”

“A *nuisance*?”

Her unexpected response had me confused.

What had she meant by that? Would remembering her past inconvenience her?

Did the things that were so dear to me mean nothing to her?

My heart hurt. It was beating so hard it felt as though it might burst. The pounding echoed in my ears, and my head was starting to ache. The cicadas in the garden started chirping even louder, making me feel overwhelmed.

What does she mean? What’s she talking about? My thoughts were racing.

Fuyutsuki smiled brightly and spoke in a tranquil tone of voice.

“I only have about six months left to live.”

She kept going.

“The cancer has spread to my liver, so I’m going to die soon.”

“I’m going to die.” Fuyutsuki had said those words so casually.

“Since I know I’m going to die soon, remembering things like that would just cause me more pain, don’t you think? Besides, Sorano, you’re better off not caring about me, seeing as I don’t have long to live. It would be a waste of your time.”

It was so sad, yet she’d said that last line so straightforwardly.

The corners of my eyes grew hot, and my vision went blurry. Warm tears started to flow down my cheeks.

“Oh.” My tears wouldn’t stop. “I see…”

I kept trying to wipe them away, but it was futile.

“Sorry,” I told her. “I’m sorry for getting myself involved in this weird way.”

“…? Are you okay?”

I didn’t want Fuyutsuki to realize I was crying. I tried my hardest to stifle my

sobs.

"Are you really going to die?"

"Yeah. Somehow, I just know I am."

She was accepting that fact so easily.

"This is the third time, after all," she added with a smile.

Had she made peace with what was going to happen? Or just resigned herself to her fate?

"I started chemo last week, and honestly, I'm not doing well. In about two weeks, I won't even be able to leave the hospital room anymore.

"So please, just forget about me.

"Please."

She had this great big smile on her face as she spoke.

"Okay."

All right. I see. I guess this is just the way it is.

My heart had broken.

I heard it snap deep inside me. Or at least, it felt like I did.

I could tell my voice was shaking.

"I'm sorry for being so stubborn," I said.

I didn't really understand what I'd done wrong, but I apologized regardless.

Tears kept streaming down my face. It felt like I was trying to force out all the feelings I'd had for Fuyutsuki. They just kept pouring out. I didn't have a handkerchief, so I had to wipe my tears away with my palms. My face was a total mess, and I didn't have a clue what I was supposed to do.

*

Fuyutsuki left me there and started making her way back to her room, running her hand along the railing.

My face was stained with tears, so I relaxed on the bench in the rooftop garden and tried to calm down.

"Are you a friend of Fuyutsuki's from school?" asked a middle-aged doctor in a white coat.

Although he seemed quite young, the doctor had noticeable dark circles underneath his eyes, and he looked worn out.

He must have noticed the distrustful look in my eyes, because he held up his hands to reassure me.

"I'm Fuyutsuki's attending physician," he explained.

Once he'd told me who he was, I gave him a small nod. To my surprise, the doctor lit a cigarette.

I was taken aback. Was he actually going to smoke in a communal area like this?

"Just so you know, this is the smoking area," he told me. "You shouldn't really be here."

"Smoking area or not, haven't you ever heard of secondhand smoke? It's bad for people's health."

My mind may have been consumed by thoughts of Fuyutsuki, but I still regretted snapping at the doctor like that.

"I'd appreciate it if you held your breath for a little while, then," he said with a smirk.

"I'm sorry for being rude. But if you're Fuyutsuki's attending physician, you must be a cancer doctor. I thought tobacco increased your risk of getting lung cancer."

"I get a checkup every month, so don't worry about me. As long as it gets detected early, I'll be able to cure it myself."

The doctor casually swayed his cigarette around. I got the impression he was an easy person to talk to.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Hmm? Is it about Fuyutsuki's memories?"

He'd known exactly what I was going to ask about.

"Yes. Is it possible for someone to lose them?"

He let out a puff of purple smoke toward the sky.

"If a tumor develops in the area of the brain that deals with memory, it's not entirely impossible. That said, in Fuyutsuki's case, her cancer has spread to her liver, so normally, memory loss wouldn't occur."

"Then why…?"

"It's rare, but your memories can become muddled when you start chemotherapy. You struggle to remember the events of the previous day, and you feel dazed. It's called chemo brain. Things like that can happen when a person takes strong medication."

"So will she…?"

"However, the symptoms Fuyutsuki is experiencing don't align with chemo brain."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think it's an illness or medication that's causing her to forget things.

It’s something psychological. You could even say it’s almost like she’s blocked her own memories.”

“What…?”

“If you stimulate her memory, something might happen… Do you want to give it a try?”

“I can’t do that. She just turned me down.”

The doctor sighed, letting out smoke at the same time.

“Well, you might still change your mind. For now, shrinking her cancer is the priority.”

“Could you tell me something?”

“What is it?”

“Will Fuyutsuki’s cancer be cured?”

The doctor put out his cigarette and looked at me.

“Well, her chances stand at about five percent.”

“A five percent chance of dying?”

“A five percent chance of surviving until the end of the year. Her five-year survival rate is pretty dismal.”

The doctor spoke in detail about her cancer, but none of it registered with me.

Fuyutsuki had a 5 percent chance of surviving the year.

She wasn’t going to last five years.

Her light could go out at any time.

That’s why she’d asked me to forget her.

My chest tightened painfully.

As the doctor was leaving, he gave me a determined look.

“I’ll cure it, though.”

*

Three days had gone by since my encounter with the doctor.

I couldn’t just quit volunteering, though, so Hayase went in my place.

Going to see Fuyutsuki was painful.

Even just looking at her was painful.

Fourth period had just finished, and I was sitting in the sun in our usual spot on the terrace. The sun was beaming down, and I could feel it burning my skin. As I sank deeper into my daze, my skin continued to burn. I could see thunderclouds in the distance, and I imagined heavy rain falling beneath them. Picturing the juxtaposition of the clear skies with the torrential rain got me in a

strangely philosophical mood—probably because I'd just had my Philosophy I lecture.

Suddenly, a voice interrupted my contemplation.

"Are you okay?"

A thin, bearded guy had approached me. It was the president of the fireworks club we'd met way back when.

"I'm hanging in there," I replied.

"That's pretty vague. It's me, Kotomugi."

Kotomugi was dressed in a T-shirt, shorts, and beach sandals, and he was carrying a bucket and a fishing rod. It seemed like he was on his way to go fishing. Sometimes I wondered whether our college gave its students too much freedom.

"Where's the blind girl?" he asked.

This mention of Fuyutsuki almost made me tear up.

Please, just drop it.

"She's in the hospital. Her health's taken a turn for the worse."

"Aw, no way. If she's your girlfriend, you should stick by her side."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"So you weren't dating?"

"She rejected me."

Stop. I'll end up crying if you don't.

"When the going gets tough, fireworks can help."

Kotomugi's blasé tone annoyed me. I was the one who was down in the dumps, and yet there he was, rambling on about fireworks. I could feel anger bubbling up inside me.

"The fireworks competition starts the week after next," he said. "Actually, we've got a bit of a problem on our hands."

Kotomugi looked troubled. Without meaning to, I let out a curt response.

"Something happen?"

"You know how the fireworks got canceled at the student festival? It's caused a bit of a problem."

Despite him saying that, Kotomugi didn't seem particularly agitated.

I didn't respond, but he continued prattling on regardless.

"It's the cancellation costs for the fireworks. This pyrotechnician I know wants to buy all the fireworks we made, but the festival committee says they can reuse them for another event, so they only want to pay for the setup costs. Both sides are in a deadlock, and I'm stuck in the middle. I wish they'd put

themselves in my shoes," he said, but I was completely uninterested in his meaningless chatter.

"I'm surprised the university lets you set off fireworks at all."

I responded to his pointless chatter with a similarly pointless comment.

However, Kotomugi seemed pleased that I'd asked him this, and he proudly began to explain the necessary procedures and applications required for launching fireworks.

Oops, I thought, regretting saying anything. *I got him going now.*

I wasn't giving him my full attention, but from what I gathered, you had to file a notice with the prefectural government and undergo a fire safety inspection before you could set off fireworks. It didn't sound like it was as easy as I'd initially assumed.

"But there is a loophole," Kotomugi continued, looking pleased. "If you have, say, fifty size-two shells, fifteen size-three shells, ten size-four shells, with waterfall-style and set-piece fireworks in between—creating a three-minute program of seventy-five fireworks in total—you can do it without any paperwork."

"Oh wow, I didn't know that," I said, feigning interest.

As monotonous as my reply sounded, Kotomugi seemed pleased that I'd said anything at all. For some reason, he'd taken a liking to me.

"I'm about to go fishing. Wanna come?" he asked with a guileless look in his eyes.

It was hard to deal with someone like him when I felt so down.

"You can catch small horse mackerel at this time of year, and the ladies at the cafeteria will fry them up for you!"

He wouldn't stop talking. I was obviously uninterested—giving responses like "Oh" and "Right"—yet he kept on chatting to me.

Please, give me a break.

But just as those words were about to leave my mouth, Kotomugi started to look for something.

"Oh, I almost forgot." He shoved his hands into his pants pockets, muttering, "Is that it?" and "Where is it?" then searched his fishing gear bag and his backpack.

"Well, I guess I should head back and start that report," I said.

I found myself suddenly irritated, and I started to rise to my feet—but at that moment, he found what he'd been looking for.

"Here it is! Found it! Doesn't this belong to your girlfriend?" he asked,

pulling something out of the bag slung over his shoulder.

I recognized it immediately. My eyes went so wide that even I noticed it happening.

My heart had been almost lifeless just moments ago, yet it had begun pounding so hard it hurt.

It was a yellow bookmark with bumps on it—the one I thought we'd lost.

"It's something I'd really like you to read, Kakeru."

Fuyutsuki's face as she said that drifted through my mind.

"Where…did you get this?"

My hands trembling, I reached out for the bookmark.

"It was on the ground outside the prefab building for our club. Since it's in braille, I figured it might be hers. I was going to give it to your girlfriend if I saw her, but since she's in the hospital, I'll give it to you instead."

How could I express my gratitude for this miracle?

Before I knew it, I was hugging Kotomugi.

"Thank you so much! I can't thank you enough!"

"Whoa! Hey, you're squishing me!"

I took the bookmark from him and examined it closely.

It really was Fuyutsuki's bookmark.

The corners were bent, the edges were tattered, and it was dirty in places.

But it had come back.

Fuyutsuki's bookmark had made its way back to me.

I was on the verge of tears.

As I ran my fingers over it, deep affection started to well up inside me.

Before I knew it, I was yelling.

"I'm sorry! There's something I need to do."

There was no basis for it, but for some reason, I had the feeling that deciphering the message on the bookmark would make things better.

Kotomugi seemed to have figured out what was going on, and he raised his fishing rod in the air.

"Good luck!"

From there, I ran to the college library.

It was deserted, and as I ran past the reception desk, someone called out behind me, "No running, please!"

I calmed my heavy breathing and started searching for a braille dictionary.

I'd never had to look for one before, so I didn't know where to find it.

I used one of the library computers to look up which shelf it was on.

"I guess it's sort of like a bucket list."

What was written on it?

"You never know when you're going to die."

She probably hadn't been joking when she said that.

Perhaps Fuyutsuki had been contending with her own fears.

There was a chance that her long-held wishes were inscribed on that very bookmark.

I couldn't help but feel that was the case.

As soon as I opened the thick braille dictionary, the smell of old books wafted toward me.

I leafed through it, using the book's instructions to help me decode the braille.

I deciphered the text one letter at a time. All in all, it took me about three hours to decode just three lines.

Line one:

Go to a drinking party. Join a club.

I burst into tears.

My body shook as I sobbed.

She'd gotten her high school equivalency diploma, gotten into college, and attended the welcome party…

This was a girl who'd been trying to achieve her dreams, using this bookmark as a guide.

Line two:

Make friends. Go shopping.

She *had* made friends. We *had* gone shopping for fireworks.

I'd been there by her side. Thinking that brought me both happiness and pain.

Line three:

Set off fireworks. Fall in love.

By the time I'd finished deciphering the text, I was sprawled across the table,

bawling my eyes out.

There was nobody else in the library. I didn't need to hold back my tears.

"You didn't get to finish it."

That was why we'd gone to buy fireworks.

That was why she'd told me she wanted to join a club.

"You didn't get to do it all."

Even I felt frustrated. I couldn't stop crying.

"Oh yeah," I murmured.

My mouth was moving on its own accord.

"Yeah. That's right."

"I think it would be wonderful if we could put on our own fireworks display. It'd be such a special day—a memory that would last a lifetime."

I thought about what Fuyutsuki had said.

I could make her wish come true for her.

I could launch those fireworks she'd been so desperate to see.

I didn't know how much longer she had left to live.

"You never know when you're going to die."

She was right about that.

That was why we couldn't give up.

"We don't have to just give up," I muttered.

It sounded almost as if I was trying to convince myself it was true.

By the time I left the library, the sky had already turned red.

The thunderclouds in the distance had vanished.

There wasn't a single cloud in the sunset above, and no sign of rain, either.

I took out my phone and made a call.

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7. Drawn Fireworks

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I'd always thought I didn't need to rely on other people. What I came to realize, however, was that this was just a form of self-defense close to giving up, and I was surprised to find an extreme stubbornness rooted within me.

Despite all the tears I'd shed, I found myself back at the hospital, chiding myself for how persistent I was being.

It was picture book reading day, and Hayase's gentle, slightly elevated tone of voice echoed throughout the Kids' Room. The children were all completely engrossed in the story.

"The princess took a bite of the small piece of fruit, and tears began streaming down her face."

She'd eaten the "fruit of truth" made by the witch, and the princess wept and confessed the lie she'd told out of concern for the prince. I could see tears in some of the kids' eyes.

"And the princess and the prince lived happily ever after."

Thanks to the lengths gone to by the prince after learning the truth, the story ended on a happy note, leaving the children in high spirits.

Although the kids seemed to be having fun, Fuyutsuki, sitting on a chair in the back, appeared to be in distress.

She seemed to be having a hard time breathing.

After story time was over, it was her turn to play the piano—but she made a lot of mistakes and had to stop a number of times.

The next day, when I turned up at my volunteer job, there was no sign of Fuyutsuki.

Apparently, she'd taken a turn for the worse.

She wasn't there the day after, either.

I knew which hospital room she was staying in.

One day, I'd been concerned about how wobbly she looked on her feet, so I'd followed her to her room without saying a word. I'd acted like a complete stalker. At the time, I'd even scared myself by what I was doing, but right now I

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was glad I'd gone to the effort.

After parting ways with Hayase and Narumi after Kids' Time, I headed straight to Fuyutsuki's hospital room. Since it was a large, high-end hospital, every room in the ward was private. The rooms were in neat rows, and each one had a nameplate with a single patient's name written on it. I went to the west wing on the seventh floor—the floor above the Kids' Room—and stood in front of a nameplate that read KOHARU FUYUTSUKI.

Just as I was about to knock, I heard voices coming from inside.

"Do you really want me to cut it?"

"Uh-huh. Please."

I quietly slid the door open a little and peeked inside.

All I could see peering through the gap was the foot of a white bed. I didn't catch a glimpse of Fuyutsuki, but I did see a woman wearing a kimono.

I didn't know much about kimonos, but even I could tell from a glance that it was expensive. The pale ultramarine fabric looked incredibly soft, and it was decorated with fans.

The woman in the kimono looked a lot like Fuyutsuki. She seemed more easygoing, and her eyes looked slightly bigger, but I figured she must be Fuyutsuki's mom. She was holding a pair of scissors.

Fuyutsuki's mother looked toward the door; she must have noticed me peeking through the gap. Then we made eye contact. *Oh crap!* I thought, so flustered my heart nearly stopped beating—but her expression soon lightened, and she placed a finger to her lips, shushing me.

"I understand, dear. I'm going to go and get a drink," she said to the person on the bed, chuckling softly.

Fuyutsuki's mom shuffled over to the door. She stepped out of the room and glanced at me, blinking her eyes inquiringly.

"Are you a friend of Koharu's?" she asked in a whisper.

"Uh, yes," I responded at normal volume, and she quickly shushed me.

"Let's go and talk over there so Koharu doesn't hear us," her mom whispered, still clutching the scissors against her chest.

She could have put them down, but instead, she carried them with her index finger and thumb through the holes. It looked a bit sinister, but she also came off as being a bit scatterbrained, as expected of Fuyutsuki's mom.

We sat down on the sofa in front of the vending machine, and she smiled at me, making eye contact. Fuyutsuki had never been able to meet my gaze, so it

felt a bit strange—probably because they looked so alike.

"You're a friend of Koharu's?" she asked again.

"Ah, yes. My name is Kakeru Sorano. We go to college together."

"College?" the woman interjected. "So she did go to college after all."

"Yeah. We studied the same subject."

"That's such a relief," she said, collapsing back on the sofa. "Ever since Koharu was hospitalized, she's been insisting that she never went to college. I was starting to think I'd lost my mind."

"Was she saying that at home, too?"

"Did she say something to you?"

"…She's acting like she has no memory of me," I said.

Fuyutsuki's mom's eyes widened.

Had I upset her?

Should I have kept that to myself?

A wave of guilt swept over me.

Surprisingly, though, Fuyutsuki's mom gave me a gentle smile.

"I see… This must be hard on you as well."

She was refusing to show her sadness on her face, which made my chest tighten.

"No, I'm okay."

"I don't believe that for a second. I'm sure it must be difficult."

"I'm fine."

"If you say so," said Fuyutsuki's mother with a laugh. How could she keep smiling like that?

"Don't you find this hard, ma'am?"

"*Ma'am*? You sound as if you're meeting your in-laws. Were you and Koharu…?"

"N-no!" I said, hastily refuting her suspicions.

"I was joking," she said with a chuckle.

She'd been laughing all throughout our exchange. The apple really didn't fall far from the tree. I couldn't help but think how similar she was to her daughter.

"I'm not sure whether I should say this to you…," she began softly.

There was a pause.

"It's been very hard."

The calmness of her voice made my whole body tense up.

“There isn’t a day that goes by without me wishing my child had been born with a healthier body. But…if I always look upset, it’ll only make things harder for her. If she’s going to overcome this, I need to be by her side, smiling.”

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. My vision started to blur as well.

“So please. I want you to stick by her side. It might be tough, but I want you to keep her company with a smile on your face.”

“I will,” I replied.

“Thank you,” she said, beaming.

Fuyutsuki’s mother started opening and closing the scissors she was holding.

“What are the scissors for?” I asked.

She looked down at them.

“Oh. I’m going to cut her hair. It’s starting to fall out because of the treatment. It’s her third time going through this, so I’m sure she knows what’s going to happen to her.”

“…I see. But her hair’s so beautiful and long.”

“Ah, she’s not just cutting it off to throw away, though. Have you heard of hair donation?”

“Like…giving away hair?”

I got out my phone to look it up. Apparently, hair donation is when people donate their hair to make wigs for children who’ve gone bald because of illness. The wigs are given away for free. It seemed like there were tons of children waiting for their turn to come around.

“If Fuyutsuki is going to lose all her hair, she could just make a wig for herself, couldn’t she?” I asked.

“She doesn’t want that,” Fuyutsuki’s mother said, shaking her head. “Losing her hair made her so upset when she was younger, so she wants to donate it to kids who’re going through the same thing.”

“That—”

The words got stuck in my throat.

This sudden example of Fuyutsuki’s kindness made me feel like I was about to cry.

I took a deep breath—then an even deeper one—in an effort to hold back the tears.

“That does sound like something Fuyutsuki would say.”

“It does, doesn’t it? Maybe this is just me being a doting parent, but I don’t think I could’ve asked for a better daughter. Come and visit her again, won’t you?”

Leaving me with those parting words, Fuyutsuki's mother waved at me with her right hand—the one still grasping the scissors—and made her way back to her daughter's room.

*

"Today, let's draw fireworks on this piece of paper."

We had the children drawing fireworks for Kids' Time today.

There was a certain type of fireworks called shaped fireworks that made patterns in the sky like smiles or stars, and I was getting the children to design these shapes.

A week earlier, after decoding Fuyutsuki's bookmark at the library, I'd called Hayase.

The first thing I'd said to her was "Let's set off some fireworks."

Hayase had been a member of the student festival committee, so I'd asked her about setting off the fireworks they'd meant to launch at the festival.

"I think it could trigger some memories for her."

I shared what the doctor had said to me, and we discussed holding the fireworks display that Fuyutsuki had missed.

We spent days planning it.

Committee member Hayase raised the question of whether the kids at the hospital would be able to see the fireworks display. After getting some advice from Kotomugi, the president of the fireworks club, our plan evolved into a "Children's Fireworks" event. We explained the situation to the parties involved, including the university and fireworks manufacturers, and eventually decided to hold a summer fireworks festival where we could showcase the fireworks that hadn't been launched at the student festival.

Back in the Kids' Room, the children were enthusiastically drawing pictures of fireworks with crayons and colored pencils.

Fuyutsuki, however, hadn't come.

According to a nurse I'd befriended, she was lying down in her room. She couldn't tell me anything more about Fuyutsuki's condition, though, seeing as it was confidential information.

After Kids' Time came to a close, Hayase handed me a white sheet of paper and some colored pencils.

“Here.”

“Thanks,” I said with a nod, and Hayase and I split up.

She took the children’s drawings back to campus, while I headed to Fuyutsuki’s hospital room.

On my way there, I bumped into her mother. She gave me a warm smile.

“Thank you,” she said.

“It’s nothing. I feel bad for intruding day after day.”

“Take care of Koharu for me. I have an errand to run.” She was holding her daughter’s phone, its screen shattered like a spiderweb. “It seems like she broke this in her room the other day. A replacement has finally arrived, so I need to go pick it up.”

“Right.”

“Oh, and take this. It’s a mask, and I also have some disinfectant spray. There’s a chance she might be asleep.”

Fuyutsuki’s mom handed me a face mask and sprayed disinfectant on my hands. This gesture alone made it clear that Fuyutsuki’s condition had worsened.

I took a deep breath in front of Fuyutsuki’s room to calm myself down, then knocked on her door.

There was no answer.

“I’m coming in.”

I crept into the room like a thief. Fuyutsuki was asleep, lying down with the back of her adjustable bed raised.

The window was open. The curtains swayed gently every time a cool breeze came into the room, and the air felt unusually fresh for the city.

Fuyutsuki’s hair had been cut short. It used to be the typical long hair most young women have, but now it stopped just above her ears.

I sat on the chair beside her bed, feeling the breeze on my skin.

I could hear Fuyutsuki’s soft, steady breathing.

She looked just like Snow White sleeping on that bed.

As I watched her, I felt a surge of affection rising in my chest.

I gazed at her beautiful face, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. I didn’t want to wake her.

I wished that tranquil moment would last forever.

Yet whenever I thought about that disease eating away at her body, it chilled me to the core.

Why was Fuyutsuki the one who had to suffer this fate?

The chance that she'd survive until the end of the year was just 5 percent.

The moment that figure went through my mind, I suddenly found myself scared looking at her tranquil sleeping face.

I found myself thinking of Fuyutsuki dying, and I was overcome by the despair I'd feel losing her.

The breeze that had been refreshing just moments earlier suddenly felt chilly, so I slowly started to close the window. As I did, it made a squeaking noise.

Dammit, I thought, frozen to the spot.

The sound made Fuyutsuki react with a start.

"Ngh," she groaned, stretching. "Mom, is that you?"

She opened her eyes and looked in my direction. My heart skipped a beat at the thought that she might see me, but of course, Fuyutsuki didn't notice who I was.

"You can leave the window open. It's nice and cool," she said in the same sweet yet spoiled way she used to say "meanie" to me. It was pretty refreshing to see her act that way.

As I watched her turn over onto her stomach, I almost laughed—but just then the lack of response from her "Mom" seemed to make her suspicious.

"Is that you, Mom? Or are you a nurse?" There was a hint of panic in her voice.

I felt too embarrassed to stay silent any longer, so I spoke up.

"Sorry. It's me, Sorano."

Fuyutsuki looked dumbfounded for a moment, but then she seemed to remember something. With an irritated look on her face, she started feeling around for the nurse call button.

"H-hang on a minute!" I cried.

"Why did you barge in here without permission?"

"I was just concerned about you. You haven't shown your face in the Kids' Room for a while."

"I told you to forget about me."

"Come on, I'm only paying a visit. Your mom asked me to."

"You talked to my mom?" she asked.

Fuyutsuki angrily sat up on the bed, but as soon as she did, she immediately hunched over, clutching her chest in pain.

There was a drip connected to her left arm, with a clear bag hanging from an IV stand.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

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“Just…give me…a moment.”

She panted, trying to settle her breathing. Her face was pale, and sweat beaded on her forehead. She looked thinner, too.

“Sorry,” I offered, not sure what else to say.

“You’re so persistent, Sorano. What will it take for you to forget about me?”

“Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

“Are you okay?”

“It hurts.”

Although she couldn’t see, she turned her eyes toward me and grinned.

It wasn’t the usual genuine smile I was used to seeing from her. It looked like there was some sadness to it.

“Recently, even water makes me throw up. That’s why I’m on an IV drip.”

“Is that a side effect of the medication? Is it really strong?”

“Yeah. My white blood cell count is low, and my mouth is full of ulcers.” Her breathing grew labored as she spoke, and I could see the cold sweat on her skin. “Have I put you off yet? You’re better off forgetting about me.”

“It doesn’t put me off at all.”

“…You really don’t back down easily, do you?” she said, turning her face away from me.

Her voice sounded frail as she continued.

“My doctor said my hair might start to fall out next week.”

“Oh… Right.”

“That’s the part I hate the most.”

Fuyutsuki was being pretty chatty today.

It might have been because she’d be crushed under the weight of her worries if she didn’t get them off her chest. Or maybe she’d just completely given up.

“I can’t see, so I don’t know what I look like.”

Fuyutsuki’s voice was gradually starting to sound more tearful, and it hurt me just to hear her like that.

“It’s so hard when you’re forced to rely on touch to help you imagine things.”

I heard a choked sob. She’d begun to cry.

The affection I felt for her was drowned out by the pain inside my chest. It felt like I was being strangled.

Then, in a small voice, she said, “I want to die.”

I couldn’t believe this was the same Fuyutsuki I used to know, who’d always

had a smile on her face.

But had that really been Fuyutsuki?

Wasn't that a version I'd conjured up in my mind, a figment of my imagination?

Wasn't the real Fuyutsuki the one lying here in front of me, her body trembling?

What could I do? What could I do to help her?

You were supposed to rub someone's back at a time like this, right?

For a moment, I felt reluctant to touch her.

But the worst thing you could do when someone you cared about was crying was to do nothing.

I touched Fuyutsuki's back, making her jump. I wondered if she didn't like it, but to my surprise, she didn't say anything. I focused on speaking in the calmest voice I could manage.

"We're planning a Children's Fireworks event at the university."

"A…Children's Fireworks event?"

"As part of our volunteer work at the hospital, we're turning the kids' drawings into fireworks. We're going to set them off on campus."

I spoke slowly, waiting for Fuyutsuki to grasp what I was suggesting.

"So there's something I wanted to ask you. Would you like to draw something, too?"

"Me?"

"Yeah. We're sending all the drawings to the fireworks company today, but it'll take a while to make them and get everything ready, so the fireworks display will be at the end of September. That's why…we've gotta try our hardest. We have a little over three months. Let's aim for your health to improve before then."

"Why?" asked Fuyutsuki, raising her voice. "Why would you say something like that?! I already said that things are tough for me! Why would you suggest I needed to try harder…? How could you be so cruel?"

She covered her face with both hands and began to cry.

Her tears fell, one by one, onto the white sheets.

"Can you feel this?"

I took her arm and placed something in her hand.

It was the yellow bookmark I'd retrieved.

As soon as she touched the bookmark, she looked surprised.

"Is this mine?"

“Sorry—I already read it.”

“…That’s not fair… That’s not fair at all.”

She wept, her face becoming drenched with tears once again.

I grabbed her by the shoulders and mustered up all the positivity I had inside me.

“Isn’t it better to have a goal to work toward?”

Fuyutsuki was someone so kind she’d decided to donate her hair to others, even though she was hurting badly herself. I wanted to cheer her up.

“Having a goal is better than just crying. So let’s try our hardest to make it come true. I can’t make your illness any less difficult, but I can come and see you, listen to you, and cheer you on. So let’s give it our best shot.”

I knew she couldn’t see me, but I smiled at her anyway.

Maybe my smile would come through in my voice or seep into the atmosphere. Even if she only sensed one percent of the encouragement I was trying to convey, that was enough. I forced a smile to try to tell her not to give up.

“Do you think things might turn out okay?”

“I’m sure they will.”

“Maybe I can try.”

Fuyutsuki kept bawling her eyes out, and I rubbed her on the back, telling her over and over that everything would be okay.

“…Can I…draw a firework, too?” she asked hoarsely.

“Of course.”

“Then promise me this: Promise me that once I’ve drawn my picture and folded it up, you won’t take a look inside.”

“Sure.”

“Turn around, please.”

“Okay.”

“Are you facing the other way?”

“Yes.”

Fuyutsuki asked me for the colored pencils, and I handed them to her. It didn’t take long for her to finish drawing her picture.

“Do you need help?”

“I can draw something like this by myself.”

She carefully folded the paper in half three times, then gave me her drawing —as well as one last reminder.

“You aren’t allowed to look at it, no matter what.”

*

Marine Day came around, marking the start of summer break.

Summer vacation for most colleges began in August and ended in September, but our college had the same vacation period as elementary, middle, and high schools. Apparently, this was to allow the students in Narumi's course to complete a month-long navigation training exercise. The fact that we did our first-semester exams in September, after summer vacation had ended, was another point that seemed to set us apart from other universities.

Fittingly for Marine Day, the weather was warm and clear.

For the first time in a while, all three of us went to our volunteering job together and played with the children. Narumi was overwhelmingly popular with the kids, and whenever he turned up, the boys would rush toward him, shouting, "Narumi!" Meanwhile, they referred to me as "Mr. Sorano."

Once Kids' Time was over, Hayase, Narumi, and I stopped by Fuyutsuki's hospital room together.

Every time I saw her, she looked even thinner.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"So-so," Fuyutsuki replied with an ambiguous smile.

I didn't know whether this meant things were a little easier or a little harder.

Her previously sharp tone had softened considerably.

However, she still looked like she was in pain.

Narumi would chatter on in his Kansai accent, talking animatedly about his part-time job as if it was some sort of heroic tale, and Hayase would respond coldly. Fuyutsuki could only muster a polite smile as she watched their repartee.

We were covered in sweat just walking back from our visit, so we stopped by a convenience store to buy ice cream. Narumi chose a soda-flavored ice pop, and Hayase and I went along with him and got the same thing. The three of us walked side-by-side as we ate our ice pops.

As I crunched into the blue ice, the cold sensation that spread through my mouth was accompanied by a familiar soda flavor.

"Whoa!" Narumi exclaimed as he bit into the bottom of his half-melted ice pop.

It was late in the afternoon, but the sun was still high in the sky. I hurriedly ate my ice pop before the blazing sun melted it. Hayase, meanwhile, took tiny

bites of hers. There was no way she'd finish it before it melted.

"Hey, Hayase. Don't let it drip," I warned her.

"But I can't help it," she replied, turning in Narumi's direction.

"Whoa, don't aim that at me," he said—so she turned back to me instead.

Hayase was sandwiched between Narumi and me, and the two of us kept going back and forth, saying, "Whoa there" and "Stay away from me" as Hayase pivoted between us. Eventually, the absurdity of the situation made the three of us burst out laughing.

"Don't laugh at me!" Hayase said sulkily as the last bit of her ice pop fell onto the asphalt below.

We all exchanged glances, then let out a sigh in unison.

For some reason, we'd found ourselves overcome with laughter. It was as if the floodgates had opened after we'd had to keep stony-faced and serious in Fuyutsuki's room.

"My stomach hurts," Hayase said, clutching her abdomen.

"Why'd we all get ice pops anyway?" Narumi wondered aloud. "I know it's a bit early, but how 'bout we get burgers for dinner? There's a place over in Tsukishima."

I was on board with Narumi's plan, but Hayase grumbled.

"What'd you wanna eat, then, Hayase?" Narumi asked.

"There's this one ramen place I've always wanted to try."

The restaurant Hayase told us about was located past Monzen-nakacho Station, under the Shuto Expressway overpass. One of her upperclassmen had raved about it, so she'd always been curious about what it was like. That said, Hayase didn't have the courage to go alone, and she was too embarrassed to invite her upperclassman to go with her.

"You're not shy about going with us, though," I said, shooting her a cold look.

"Nope," replied Hayase with a coquettish smile.

"Let's take the train from Tsukishima, then," said Narumi, lacing his hands behind his head. Then, in a strangely calm voice, he added, "We probably shouldn't visit Fuyutsuki in a big group anymore."

"Yeah," Hayase replied, a serious look on her face.

Fuyutsuki was in such a bad state that we hadn't even been able stay in her hospital room for more than fifteen minutes.

It was the right decision not to hang around for long, given her poor health. But today, it had really felt like we weren't supposed to be there.

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We couldn't bring ourselves to watch Fuyutsuki suffer. It just cast a shadow over our hearts.

"Once summer vacation starts, I'll be doin' my navigation training, so I won't be back at the dorm till the end of August," said Narumi.

"Oh, really?" asked Hayase.

"You didn't know 'bout that? It's what my course does—sail around Japan on a training ship."

"I want some Genghis Khan Caramels from Hokkaido as a souvenir," Hayase said.

"It's not a vacation," Narumi replied with a troubled smile. Still, I had a feeling he'd get some for her anyway.

"Should we take turns visiting Koharu, then?" Hayase asked.

"I'll go," I said automatically.

"By yourself?"

"Yeah."

"You don't want me to come?"

"Nah. Actually, I'd prefer to go alone."

"All right," Hayase said with a nod. "To make up for it, I'll get everything ready for the fireworks event. Maybe that will help jog Koharu's memory."

"We won't know unless we try."

"Yeah," replied Hayase, and a heavy atmosphere settled over us.

"The chances of us bringing her memories back are incredibly small, but I'll be happy as long as we can show Fuyutsuki and the kids some fireworks."

Hayase and Narumi exchanged glances, then nodded to each other.

"Wait, aren'tcha goin' home for summer break?" Narumi asked me.

"I'm not planning to. Come to think of it, where's your home, Hayase?"

"Me? I live at home."

"Wait, your family's got a house in Kiyosumi Shirakawa? You must be loaded, having a place in central Tokyo…"

"Maybe we should get our rich friend to treat us to ramen tonight." Narumi laughed.

"No way! I come from a family of regular office workers!" Hayase protested. A strange rhythmical lilt came over her voice when she said "office workers," and Narumi and I burst out laughing.

Hayase puffed out her cheeks indignantly as we boarded the subway, and the three of us headed off to eat some ramen.

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*

Fuyutsuki was wearing a knitted yellow hat and her complexion looked good when I went to see her.

She said she'd grown accustomed to the medication, so the side effects had eased. I told her what the children had been doing during Kids' Time, and she shut her eyes and started nodding off.

I stopped talking and held my breath.

A bunch of flowers I didn't recognize decorated the windowsill. They had numerous white blooms at the ends of their thick stalks, and as I drew closer, I caught a whiff of their strong smell.

"Sorano?"

"Mm?"

"I thought you'd gone somewhere."

"I'm right here."

"I get scared whenever you go quiet, thinking you'll play a prank on me."

"Who do you take me for?"

"Someone who's persistent, who can't let things go."

"Uhhh…"

My shoulders slumped. Meanwhile, a joyful smile spread across Fuyutsuki's face.

"The medicine…," she whispered. "It seems to be working. Apparently, it's gotten a little smaller."

For a moment, it felt like the room had been engulfed by silence.

It surprised me—but in a good way for once. I stared at Fuyutsuki, lost for words.

"R-really?!" I couldn't help but shout. "That's great news!"

I knew I was delighted not only for Fuyutsuki but for my own sake.

Still, I couldn't hide my joy.

"Yes, it is."

"You've really tried your best, haven't you?"

Tears fell from the corners of her eyes.

She asked for a tissue, and I handed one to her.

No matter how strong a front she put up, she must have been terrified.

I wanted to circumvent discussing her illness any further, so I changed the topic to the flowers in the vase.

"Those white flowers smell nice."

"They're called spider lilies. Mom must have put them here. They're my favorites."

"Whoa."

"There you go again. 'Whoa.'"

"Huh?"

"It's just, you always say that."

"Do I?"

"Yeah, you say it all the time."

I responded with another "Whoa," making Fuyutsuki chuckle.

She was right—I do say it a lot.

"Now that you mention it, you used to have that flower as your LINE icon," I told her.

Fuyutsuki didn't respond. She just narrowed her eyes, and there was a certain melancholy to the look on her face.

*

When I visited Fuyutsuki the next day, her hospital room was empty.

A neatly folded blanket sat on her white bed, and sunlight streamed through the white lace curtains.

It felt so lonely.

I had a bad feeling in the bottom of my stomach.

I set off at almost a jog and left the room, looking for Fuyutsuki.

Fuyutsuki. Fuyutsuki. Fuyutsuki.

Where had she gone?

I turned the corner of the corridor—and there she was. There was a handrail on the wall below waist height, which Fuyutsuki was putting all her weight on as she made her way down the hall.

"Fuyutsuki! What's going on?"

"Oh, Sorano. Is that you?"

"Don't you 'Oh, Sorano' me. Where are you going?"

"Everything's fine. I've just been laid up in bed for so long my muscles have atrophied. If I don't take a walk every now and then, my illness will get the

better of me."

Fuyutsuki walked arduously down the corridor. She relied on the handrail to guide her, but it cut off between the individual hospital rooms, so she had no choice but to run her hand along the wall for those sections. She was putting everything she had into it.

"Did your doctor tell you it was okay to do this? You shouldn't push yourself too hard."

"But…"

She turned to face me, still leaning against the handrail.

There was sweat on her forehead, but her smile hadn't faded.

In fact, she laughed.

"But wouldn't it be awful if I couldn't walk by myself on the day of the fireworks? I've decided to keep trying my hardest until then."

She jokily puffed out her cheeks and said, "So please give me your support."

"I'll lend you a hand on your way back."

"Would you mind if I held on to your left arm, then?"

Fuyutsuki groped the air in front of her, then grabbed hold of my left arm. She started walking slowly, taking it one step at a time.

After doing a lap of the corridors, she started making her way back to her bed.

"I won't let this beat me," Fuyutsuki said, her sightless eyes fixed directly on the corridor ahead.

That day after, though, her condition deteriorated, and I wasn't able to see her for a week.

*

For college students, summer break could be unbearably boring unless you filled up your schedule with things like visiting family or working part-time.

I was used to Narumi's company at home, so it was weird when he suddenly wasn't there anymore. Our silent dorm room made me feel weirdly restless.

Since we didn't have any air conditioning, I found myself covered in sweat, and my T-shirts stuck to my skin. The heat made me irritable, adding to my restlessness. The fact that I was worried about Fuyutsuki's health didn't help, either.

I was bored, but I didn't feel like working.

Fuyutsuki wasn't allowed any visitors, so I couldn't go to visit her.

I literally had nothing to do.

I didn't feel like going back home, and I didn't have any friends to hang out with. Nor did I have any money.

When I got in touch with Hayase, she told me she was going to visit the fireworks manufacturer, so I decided to tag along.

We had to transfer trains to get to where the fireworks were being made, and when we finally arrived, I found out that Kotomugi was working there part-time.

"Come on, Sorano, lend us a hand!" he called out, and after he'd been the one to find Fuyutsuki's bookmark, I felt obligated to help him out.

Kotomugi was carrying several fireworks shells about the size of small watermelons in his arms.

"We're moving them over there," he said cheerfully.

The shells were sitting in a cool, dark place, and we had to carry them to a spot in the sun so they could dry.

"You've got this!" Hayase said, cheering me on from the shade.

When I suggested we take a break, Kotomugi pointed to a small window in the fireworks factory.

It seemed like he was inviting me to take a peek inside with him.

"Looks like they're pasting shells at the moment," Kotomugi said.

I could see people in overalls pasting thick strips of paper onto softball-shaped spheres. The workers had cotton towels around their necks, which they were using to regularly wipe the sweat off their foreheads.

"What's shell pasting?" I asked.

"It's the final stage of the firework-making process. They put two hemispherical shells filled with gunpowder together to create a single shell and tape them together, then paste strip after strip of kraft paper onto it in a specific crisscross pattern."

"Sounds like hard work."

"It sure is. Once the paper's glued on, they roll the shells on a board to squeeze out any air bubbles, and after letting them dry in the sun, they paste on more kraft paper. They repeat that same process over and over again to ensure the pressure is even on the inside when it bursts, making the firework explode in a perfect circle."

As I watched the workers systematically continue to paste paper onto the fireworks shells, the only response I could muster was "That really does sound tough."

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“It’s this process of layering strips of paper that creates the energy when the firework explodes. I think that’s why everyone loves fireworks so much.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, and Kotomugi explained with a smile.

“Everyone has things they keep bottled up inside, right? Fireworks explode with a *Bang!* and they release all that energy. That’s what makes them great. I’m sure people feel the same sort of way when they watch fireworks.”

*

That night, while I was reading a book in bed, my mom called me for the first time in a while.

As soon as I heard her voice, it felt as though we’d spoken just the day before.

I gave her a brief update on my studies and life in the dorm, and when she responded, she sounded relieved.

“You’re not coming home to visit?” she asked.

“No. I didn’t plan on it.”

“I take it you have a girlfriend, then.”

“How’d you come to that conclusion?”

“It’s been three months, so I’m sure you’ve had a girlfriend or two. Unlike here, there are lots of young girls in Tokyo,” Mom said over the phone. She made it sound like Tokyo was my own personal harem.

“Are you and your boyfriend getting along well?”

“Uh-huh.”

She was living with a man she’d met when I was in my senior year of high school. He seemed like a mild-mannered sort of guy. I didn’t want to get in their way, so the idea of going home made me feel uncomfortable.

“Can I ask you a bit of a tough question?” I asked.

“Sure.”

“If your boyfriend got sick and ended up being hospitalized, what would you do?”

“I guess I’d go visit him every day.”

“What if his prognosis wasn’t good?”

“I’d hold his hand until he took his last breath.”

She said that as if it was no big deal without even asking for any more context.

“You’re so strong,” I told her.

“Raising a child of your own makes anyone strong.”

“So there’s no easy way to toughen up mentally?”

“There’s nothing wrong with being weak. And this may just be coming from me, but you’ve grown into a very kind person.”

“Quit it.”

I felt embarrassed, and I could feel my ears burning.

“The fact that you distance yourself from people…well, it’s just because you’re young, Kakeru.”

“I told you to quit it.”

“If you stay by someone’s side, it doesn’t matter whether you’re strong or weak. Just be there for them. That’s all you need to do.”

“Thanks,” I murmured.

Mom told me she’d transfer some money into my account, then hung up. It seemed like she’d just assumed I had no money and was too embarrassed to mention it.

I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling.

All of a sudden, I got the uncontrollable urge to see Fuyutsuki. The sound of cicadas and a warm breeze drifted in through the open window.

*

Once she was allowed to have visitors again, I started going to see Fuyutsuki on a daily basis.

August had arrived, and the heat intensified with each passing day.

The sun in the sky shone white, as if scorching the earth, and the roads were so hot that heat emanated from the sidewalk. I was being burned from both above and below. After just five minutes of walking, sweat had glued my T-shirt to my skin, and the roughly two-kilometer-long trek from my dorm to the hospital made me feel like I was going to melt.

Fuyutsuki’s tumor had apparently shrunk, and she was actively trying to regain her strength.

As soon as I made it out of the sweltering inferno and stepped into the air-conditioned hospital, my entire body instantly cooled down; it was heavenly. The relief also seemed to calm my desperate need to see Fuyutsuki. After wiping away the waterfall of sweat pouring out of me with a deodorized sheet, I headed to her room.

“It’s me, Sorano,” I called out once I’d got there.

“Thanks for always coming to visit me.”

“Do you wanna go on another walk today?”

Fuyutsuki swung her legs over the edge of the bed, and I told her where to find her slippers. Then I offered her my left arm for support.

Her cool hand gently touched mine, and she let me support her weight.

Ever so slowly, we made our way out of the room.

Fuyutsuki walked down the hall clutching on to my left arm.

She was putting all her effort into walking, so we couldn’t make conversation. Still, though, there were some things I could pick up on through her arm.

When she was struggling to keep her balance, her grip would tighten, and it loosened whenever she felt like she could walk on her own. Fuyutsuki kept her eyes straight ahead the whole time, her expression somber and focused.

We walked to the rooftop garden, which had become our regular spot. We’d take a breather there before heading back to Fuyutsuki’s room. It was a trip we did almost every day, depending on Fuyutsuki’s condition, and though it would normally take all of three minutes, it took us about ten.

“Okay. We’re here.”

In the shade of the rooftop garden stood a vending machine. A plastic garden table and chairs were set out in front of it. It was just like the terrace seating area back at college.

“Do you want something to drink?” I asked.

“I’ll buy it myself.”

“I guess this *is* your vending machine.”

“Would you cut that out already?”

I led Fuyutsuki over to the machine, and she laughed as she counted out the coins in her hand.

The vending machine in the rooftop garden was the same paper cup–type one as the terrace, but the button layout was slightly different. I told Fuyutsuki where the milk tea button was and how to adjust the sugar level.

Sure enough, she chose milk tea with extra sugar. Even though she’d lost her memories, her drink preferences hadn’t changed one bit.

I helped Fuyutsuki into a chair and placed her drink in front of her. She gently wrapped her hands around the cup and drank her milk tea with both hands.

“Is it good?”

“Sweet milk tea is the best.”

“You’ll get cavities.”

“I’ve never had a cavity in my life.”

“Some people don’t have cavity-causing bacteria in their mouths, so they never get any. They can be transmitted through things like kissing, though.”

“Is that right?” she said, smiling. “You’d need to be really determined to get one, then.”

As I watched Fuyutsuki slowly sipping her milk tea, I thought back to that day when we’d had our first kiss.

Had she been “really determined” to kiss me?

I wanted to ask her, but there was no point. She didn’t have any recollection of it.

My heart was filled with frustration, bitterness, and embarrassment.

Suddenly, the image of Fuyutsuki putting her face close to mine went through my brain.

My face grew hot. I gulped down my cup of juice in one go and crunched the small ice cubes between my teeth.

I let out a sigh and looked up.

The sky was blue as far as the eye could see. Sitting there staring into the bright light from my spot in the shade must have affected my eyes in some way, because the color of the sky started to look even more vivid than normal.

There wasn’t a single cloud in sight, and the wind blowing around the building gently caressed my cheeks.

Fuyutsuki was drinking her cold tea as if it were hot, clutched in both hands. She sat staring straight ahead with a vacant look in her eyes, and when I saw her like that, I was overcome with affection.

“Sorano?”

“Yeah?”

“I thought you’d disappeared.”

“I just went into my shell.”

“You’re such a meanie.”

As I watched Fuyutsuki laugh, I wished that moment would last forever.

*

“Isn’t this annoying for you?” Fuyutsuki asked listlessly one day.

She didn’t seem to be doing well, and all her body weight was supported by the bed.

“I’m blind, and I’m sick. You’d be better off spending your time on someone who’s healthy and can see.”

“Is something wrong?”

Her emotions seemed all over the place.

After a short pause, she eventually answered me.

“The cancer has shrunk, but they think it might have spread elsewhere.”

She said it so matter-of-factly it almost sounded like she was talking about someone else, rather than herself.

There was an IV drip in her arm, her speech was somewhat sluggish, and she looked as though she was in pain.

“Are—?”

She cut me off before I could finish asking “Are you all right?”

“I’m lying.”

“Huh?”

“I’m lying, lying, lying, lying, lying.”

Looking up at the ceiling, Fuyutsuki forced a smile, but I could only see it in the very corners of her mouth.

“I let my gloominess get the better of me, even though I’ve decided to keep going until the fireworks display. Forget everything I just said.”

“Hey, you don’t need to try to force yourself to be happy,” I told her.

“My doctor told me something.” Tears welled up in her eyes, and she pasted on a smile. “He said that smiles scare cancer away. That’s why I’ve got to keep smiling. Once I’m better, we can practice walking again.”

Seeing Fuyutsuki smile like that, her face visibly emaciated, my chest tightened.

I put a hand to my heart, grateful that she couldn’t see me. I should have said something encouraging like “You’ll get better” or “It’ll be all right,” but I just couldn’t.

“I’m being transferred to a hospital in Hokkaido in October.”

It was so sudden that all I could say was “Huh?”

“To be honest, I’m still debating whether or not to go. There’s a proton therapy machine at a hospital up in Hokkaido, and they asked me if I wanted to go there.” At this point in her explanation, Fuyutsuki started coughing a little. “Still…that’s only if…this medication shrinks…the cancer enough…before I go.”

“I’ll be rooting for you.”

“You’d better not follow me all the way to Hokkaido,” she said, grinning as a

tear slid down her cheek and onto her pillow.

"We decided on a date for the fireworks," I told her.

"When is it?"

"The fourth Saturday of September. Keep on fighting hard until then. Let's chase off this cancer."

"I'll try my best," Fuyutsuki said slowly. "There's something I want you to do for me, though."

"Sure."

"Huh?"

"Hmm?"

"Aren't you going to ask what the favor is first?"

"I'm sure it's something I can manage."

I was willing to do anything for her.

"Thank you," Fuyutsuki said quietly.

She slowly passed me a book that was lying at her bedside.

"Could you read this book to me?"

It was the same white book that Fuyutsuki had always been reading at college.

"I can't read braille."

"Then learn."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Fuyutsuki chuckled, coughing as she did so.

"It's *The Diary of Anne Frank*, right? I'll look for it next time I get the chance."

"Thank you," Fuyutsuki said sluggishly, before falling asleep.

From that point onward, I started reading books to Fuyutsuki during my visits. It became my daily routine, and I visited her frequently, regardless of how well she was doing.

One day, while I was reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* to her aloud, Fuyutsuki asked me a question. We were over halfway through the book by that point.

"Sorano, your voice sounds hoarse. Do you have a summer cold?"

"If you had to read this much every day, you'd sound hoarse, too."

Fuyutsuki laughed lightly—but then, all of a sudden, it devolved into a coughing fit.

A wheezing noise was coming from the back of Fuyutsuki's throat. I quickly

pressed the nurse call button, repeatedly reassuring her that everything would be okay, and the ringing of the alarm echoed in my ears.

*

Fuyutsuki spent about two weeks in the intensive care unit. By the time she was let out, it was September, and summer break had come to an end.

"I can't die before I see the fireworks."

There were three strings of a thousand paper cranes laid by Fuyutsuki's pillow. Apparently, Narumi had been making them the whole time he'd been on the ship, and with the help of other people in his course, he'd managed to fold three thousand of them.

Word of Fuyutsuki's hospitalization had spread through the university, and everyone who knew her was rooting for her. It seemed like Fuyutsuki had even become famous around school, being called "the stunning beauty skipping around campus" and "the angel of the terrace."

We had our first-semester exams at college, and somehow or another, I managed to make it through them. However, I did end up failing several of my elective subjects.

That was fine, though. I could make up the credits at a later date; right now, Fuyutsuki was a bigger priority for me.

And the following week was when we'd be having the Children's Fireworks event.

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9. The Children's Fireworks

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We were blessed with good weather on the day of the Children's Fireworks event, and the staff from the fireworks manufacturer had spent the whole day setting up on campus.

At three PM, I visited Fuyutsuki's room in the hospital and helped her into a wheelchair.

Fuyutsuki's mom was there, too. She smiled and told me how much she'd been looking forward to the event.

"I hope everything goes well today, Sorano," she said.

"I hope so, too," I told her.

"I even managed to borrow a wheelchair."

Fuyutsuki's mom had rented a wheelchair from the hospital especially for today. There were only so many wheelchairs available, so apparently it was pretty hard to borrow one.

"Will you take Koharu up to the garden?" she asked.

"Mom!"

"Why not? Think of it as a date."

"That's not what this is," Fuyutsuki insisted, sitting in the wheelchair.

"You don't have to be *that* dismissive of the idea," I said with a laugh.

"Would you mind pushing me?" she asked quietly, sounding embarrassed.

"Of course."

Once I got the wheelchair moving, it glided down the corridors with ease. It was easier to push than I'd expected, but when I noticed how light it felt, I couldn't help but feel shaken up. I could feel with my own hands how Fuyutsuki was physically wasting away, and I felt a pang of agony, as if someone had stabbed me through the heart.

What if Fuyutsuki sensed my pain and was saddened by it? After all the hard work she'd put in to make it to today, I couldn't help but worry about that.

I put on a brave face and wheeled Fuyutsuki to the rooftop garden.

The sky stretched out above us. I could hear the buzzing of cicadas and the rustling of leaves. I felt at peace.

"Wanna go over to the vending machine?" I asked.

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“I’d love a milk tea. But…”

“If you can’t finish it, I’ll drink the rest.”

“You shouldn’t spoil me too much.”

“How am I spoiling you?”

“Never mind,” Fuyutsuki replied, looking down at the ground.

I bought an iced milk tea with a generous helping of sugar and handed it to her. Just like before, she held the cup with both hands and drank it slowly. You’d almost be forgiven for thinking it was hot.

“You seem pretty cheerful today,” I said.

“That’s because I tried my hardest. I managed to hold out until today.”

She made it sound as though her life force was going to fizzle out that very next day.

My palms grew sweaty.

“Today isn’t the finish line, you know.”

“Huh? I thought we decided my goal was to see the fireworks.”

“That was just an interim goal.”

“That’s so unfair.”

“You’re going to get better at that other hospital, aren’t you?”

“My hand…,” she said.

Fuyutsuki extended her hand toward me.

“Will you hold it for me?”

Her outstretched hand was trembling. Taking it in mine, it felt as cold as ice.

“Ahhh, it’s so warm,” she said.

“You shouldn’t talk about a person’s hand as if it’s a hot drink,” I joked.

“Ah-ha-ha. A hot drink… Don’t make me laugh. It hurts.”

“Sorry,” I said, laughing.

“You know what? I really am grateful to you, Sorano. Now I feel like I can’t let this illness defeat me.”

When she told me that, I couldn’t help but wish her illness would just disappear.

I wished it would just leave her body, as if it had never been there at all.

I longed for a future where Fuyutsuki’s efforts would be rewarded in some way.

The two of us sat there in silence for a little while.

Suddenly, Fuyutsuki spoke up.

“If…”

“Hmm?”

“No, never mind.”

“What is it?”

“Seriously, it’s fine.”

Shortly after, I took Fuyutsuki back to her room.

“I’ll come back to get you in the evening,” I told her before returning to campus.

As I walked, I found myself thinking of Fuyutsuki’s drawing.

I wondered what kind of firework she’d designed.

When I got back to campus, I saw the college president talking to Hayase, asking her how things were going.

The Children’s Fireworks event had become a highly anticipated occasion, in part thanks to the flyers that had been distributed in the nearby shopping district.

That popularity had also drawn the interest of the university, with the president saying that if it was a success, they’d want to make it an annual tradition.

Narumi twisted the cap off a water bottle. He’d been keeping an eye on the fireworks preparations.

“How’s Fuyutsuki?” he asked, noisily gulping down his drink.

“She seemed well.”

“Did she get permission to leave today?”

“Her mom’s talking it over with her doctor. As long as Fuyutsuki’s condition doesn’t take a turn for the worse, she should be fine.”

“That’s great,” Narumi said, taking another gulp of water.

The dry late-September wind slipped up the sleeves of my T-shirt. It felt cool against my skin, but the sun was still strong.

I bought some sparkling water from the vending machine, and it made a fizzing sound when I twisted the cap.

“How many of the kids are attending?” I asked.

“About half of ’em got permission to leave the hospital.”

Narumi was responsible for explaining things to the children’s parents and guiding them all to the venue.

The fireworks were scheduled to start at six PM, just after the sun had set.

“I feel bad for all the children who won’t be able to see them,” I said to Narumi.

“We’ve got a plan for those kids, too.”

“I really hope this goes well.”

“I hope seeing the fireworks jogs Fuyutsuki’s memory.”

“Well…I don’t care about that,” I told him.

Narumi looked taken aback.

“It’s about time we went to pick her up,” I announced, and with that, we started making our way to the hospital.

At the hospital, I went over the plan with the parents and children who were heading to campus that evening.

I gave them a hand-drawn map, pointing out where to get out of the taxi for the shortest walk, and told them where there were places to sit.

After finishing my explanation, I said good-bye to Narumi and headed to Fuyutsuki’s room.

I hurried through the hospital, unable to contain my excitement.

Fuyutsuki’s wish was going to come true.

That was the one thought on my mind as I walked down the seventh-floor corridor in the hospital’s west wing.

The door to Fuyutsuki’s room was open.

A sense of dread washed over me.

I could hear several pairs of footsteps clattering against the floor.

I had a bad feeling that something had happened.

“Ms. Fuyutsuki! Are you okay? Are you conscious? I’m going to activate the suction now!”

The doctor’s voice sounded urgent.

Before I knew it, I was running toward the hospital room.

“Fuyutsuki!” I yelled from the doorway.

Fuyutsuki’s mother had her hands clasped against her mouth, staring at her daughter.

“Hey, you! Move! Don’t come in!” a nurse shouted at me.

She yelled at me again in the same harsh tone. I remained rooted to the spot, so she pushed me by my shoulder, sending me staggering over to the far side of the corridor.

Deep down, I’d hoped that if anything ever happened, one of the nurses who’d seen me visit so frequently would ask me to talk to Fuyutsuki to try to get through to her.

In this situation, though, I was nothing but a hindrance.

Everyone was busy doing their jobs, frantic expressions across their faces.

Fear seemed to have nailed my feet to the floor.

I couldn't move. My knees shook, and my mind went blank, causing me to collapse backward.

"This can't be happening," I muttered, unable to discern what was real and what wasn't. The reality of the situation playing out in front of me was too much to process.

When I took my phone out of my pocket, I could see my hands trembling.

I needed to let Narumi know as soon as possible that Fuyutsuki was in trouble and get in touch with Hayase. The more I thought about it, the more panicked I became.

Before I realized it, I'd dialed the number for an ambulance. I hung up before the first ring.

*

It must have been around five PM when Fuyutsuki's mother came out of the room. She gave the doctors and nurses a deep bow as they left.

"Is Fuyutsuki okay?" I asked her.

"I'm sorry for making you worry, Sorano. She just coughed up some blood, and it got stuck in her airway, making it hard for her to breathe. She's fine now."

Could you really say someone was fine after they'd coughed up blood?

"Could I ask you to do me a favor?" she asked.

"Sure."

"I'm just…"—the words seemed to catch in her throat—"…tired."

There were tears in her eyes, and her face was as white as a sheet.

She must have been through this kind of an ordeal numerous times already.

Did she look like this every time?

My heart ached for her.

I clutched the chest section of my T-shirt in my fist, trying to withstand the pain.

"Will you stay by her side for me?"

"Of course. Make sure you get some rest."

I stepped into Fuyutsuki's room, as if I were subbing in for her mother.

I sat on the chair by the window and watched her sleeping soundly.

As I gazed at her sleeping face, the worry that she'd stopped breathing gnawed at me. It was only when I saw her chest rising and falling that I relaxed.

She was alive. That was enough to make me feel relieved.

Loving her had come with its challenges, I had to admit.

I'd come close to giving up countless times, but I'd held on nonetheless.

Fuyutsuki's smile had drawn me to her, and I was desperate to see it again.

When I updated Narumi about the situation via LINE, he said, That's good to hear. His next message began with the words If Fuyutsuki wakes up…

It was the end of September, so the sun had set at around five thirty.

I didn't turn on the lights inside her pitch-black room but instead opened the curtains and cracked the window open slightly.

The city lights of Tokyo seeped in, piercing through the darkness.

"Sorano?"

That was the first thing Fuyutsuki said after opening her eyes.

"Yeah?"

"I sensed it was you."

"So you can sense me when I disappear now?"

"Yes. We've spent a lot of time together, after all."

Fuyutsuki laughed, her voice raspy.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Five fifteen."

"We're going to miss the fireworks."

"You're not allowed to go out today."

Fuyutsuki had a playful look in her eyes, as if to say *Oopsie*, but tears began to well up in them.

"But I tried so hard."

Teardrops trickled down her face, getting her pillow wet.

Fuyutsuki covered her eyes with her arms, trying to stop the tears from flowing.

I went over to the side of the bed and gently stroked her head as she cried.

"It's okay."

"What do you mean?" Fuyutsuki asked, brushing my hand away. "It's already too late."

A whisper escaped her lips.

"I tried so hard. I was so desperate to survive."

She'd clung on to life, even when she'd been so close to giving up. I wanted to offer her a glimmer of hope, even if it was only something small.

Her voice had sounded as if it was filled with tears, and I stroked her head again.

"It's okay. We'll make it," I told her.

“What do you mean?”

I pulled out my phone and asked her to wait a moment.

“This might not be very impressive, but…”

I pressed the call button.

After a few rings, I heard Hayase’s voice.

“Are you okay, Koharu?”

“What’s going on?” asked Fuyutsuki, sounding bewildered. It must have surprised her to suddenly hear Hayase’s voice.

“It’s a video call. Let’s watch the fireworks from here today.”

“I’m here, too!” said Narumi.

He wasn’t outdoors, though, but standing in front of pastel-colored wallpaper.

“I’m showin’ the fireworks on a big screen in the Kids’ Room, so all the children who can’t go out can still watch ’em.”

“Hang in there, piano lady!” shouted one of the kids.

“Whoa, that’s pretty high-tech.”

Fuyutsuki groped around, feeling for the hand I was holding my phone with, and I took her hand and placed it on top of mine.

It might have been on a phone screen, but for the first time in a long while, the four of us—me and Fuyutsuki, Hayase and Narumi—were all together again.

I was overcome with joy as I looked at our four faces.

“It’s about to start!”

Hayase switched from the front camera facing her to the one on the back of her phone.

“Three, two, one…”

I could hear a countdown.

Then there was a whooshing sound, and a streak of light shot up into the sky.

That next moment—*bang*. A yellow firework burst open.

The fireworks sparkled on my phone screen inside Fuyutsuki’s dimly lit room.

Bang, bang, bang. We could hear the fireworks through my phone speakers.

About five seconds later, I heard something explode outside Fuyutsuki’s window.

“Sorano.”

“Yeah?”

“Tell me what you see.”

“Okay.”

Fuyutsuki squeezed my hand.

"Just now, a yellow firework was shot up into the sky. It burst in a perfect circle, then all traces of it faded away."

"I see."

"Wait, how do I explain this one? Some of the light from the firework was left behind after it exploded, and it sort of looks like a weeping cherry tree."

"Is it pretty?"

"Really pretty."

I described each firework to Fuyutsuki, one by one.

I told her which fireworks were being set off and how they burst and disappeared.

"I'm so happy."

Fuyutsuki bumped her head against mine.

When I glanced at her from the side, I could see tears flowing down her face.

"I'm so happy that I got to watch these fireworks with everyone else."

My phone screen glowed yellow, and a noise reverberated through the speakers. A roaring string of short, sharp bursts echoed outside the window.

Then I heard Hayase speak.

"Now it's time for the Children's Fireworks, created from the kids' pictures. These are called shaped fireworks; the gunpowder is arranged in the shape of a picture, which creates the same image in the night sky. I hope you'll enjoy these fireworks, which symbolize the children's dreams."

The fireworks designed by the kids were coming up next.

"First up is Hiroto, who says he loves seeing his mom smile."

A firework in the shape of a smiley face lit up the sky. The next one was a flower in bloom, which—according to Hayase's announcement—was designed by a kid who wanted to become a florist when they recovered from their illness. Hayase introduced the children one by one as their fireworks were set off.

I could hear the children crying out with joy through my phone.

"It sounds like they're having fun," Fuyutsuki murmured happily.

Seeing her like that, I asked her a question.

"Why do you like fireworks?"

The first thing she said was "I guess I admire them," but she soon elaborated.

"I think fireworks leave a mark on your heart. Once, when I was feeling down and unwell as a kid, my parents took me to see the fireworks. There was this big one that went off, and when I looked behind me, everyone was gazing

up at it, and I don't know why, but it gave me the determination to keep going. Even now, when I'm feeling down, those memories of looking up at the sky keep me going."

Fuyutsuki was watching the fireworks.

She was watching the ones that had endured in her memory.

Seeing the fireworks she'd gazed up at in the past.

Replaying her memories of looking up at the sky.

Her eyes did not work any longer, but there was no doubt about it—she could see them.

Watching Fuyutsuki's face light up with joy made my heart flood with a myriad of emotions.

My chest tightened. I felt happy. My eyes started to burn with tears.

I didn't know what to call this feeling I was experiencing.

I just wanted Fuyutsuki, who'd been battling her own hidden anxieties, to look up at the sky once again.

As she listened to the kids' fireworks explode, Fuyutsuki said something.

"I want to live in a way that leaves a mark on somebody's heart, too."

She knew life was short. Perhaps that was why the fleeting light of the fireworks inspired such admiration in her.

"You've left your mark on mine," I said, my voice thick with emotion.

"Reeeally?" Fuyutsuki asked with a playful smile. She must have noticed the tone in my voice.

The next moment, I heard Narumi's voice coming through the speaker.

"You made your mark on me, too."

"Wait, Narumi, you were listening?"

"I was, too!" chimed in Hayase. *"Are you having fun, Koharu?"*

"I'm having so much fun!" Fuyutsuki replied.

"Okay, this next firework is by Koharu," Hayase announced, beginning her narration.

"Wait, what? Does this mean I'm going to watch my firework next to you, Sorano?"

"Koharu has suffered from illness over and over again, so to express her gratitude to those who have supported her—"

"Oh no, this is embarrassing. Look away, Sorano," Fuyutsuki demanded, but it was futile.

With a soft *boom,* her firework stretched out across the night sky.

It was in the shape of a huge heart.

"It's a love heart."

"I know! I drew it myself! Please don't say it out loud."

"Why are you embarrassed of your own drawing?" I retorted.

"Shut up," she said, smacking me softly with her hand.

"And now, this last firework is by Kakeru Sorano," Hayase announced.

Oh, right…

I remembered Hayase had asked me to draw a firework, too.

"You drew one as well?" Fuyutsuki asked.

A white streak soared up into the night. For a moment, it looked like it had vanished—but then it exploded with a *boom*, lighting up the sky.

"What shape did you draw?"

Fuyutsuki turned to me, smiling mischievously. Her face was right next to mine. She looked thinner than before, but her smile never failed to make my heart skip a beat.

My firework, which shone brilliantly in the night sky, was shaped like her.

"Fuyutsuki…"

"What is it?"

"I've never said this to you directly, but…"

My mouth was moving on its own.

Words I'd hidden and suppressed burst forth from my lips like fireworks.

"I love you. Can I stay by your side forever?"

♪

The day I kissed Kakeru, I'd ended up fainting at home from anemia.

I jokingly thought I might have been lovesick, but when my mom—who was a natural worrier—took me to get a late-night examination, they found a dark shadow on my X-ray.

The next day, the doctor carried out a more detailed examination, and I was diagnosed with stage IV metastatic cancer. I was told then and there that I needed to be hospitalized.

I went home to pack my things, and it was there that my worries hit me.

Naturally, it wasn't so much what was going to happen to my body that troubled me, but what was going to happen with Kakeru.

What would happen if I confessed my feelings to him…?

What if, by some chance, he reciprocated my feelings?

It would all probably just be a waste of his time.

And if I died, it could traumatize him.

At that point, however, I still had the opportunity to back out.

He'd be able to find someone else. I wept and wept as those thoughts raced through my mind.

I cried because I loved him—and because I had to put that love behind me.

Then something surprising happened.

I received a LINE message from Yuuko. She'd sent me a video, and I double-tapped the screen to play it.

"Attention, everyone!"

It was Kakeru's voice.

"I have an important announcement to make!"

Was he planning on doing something amusing?

The timing couldn't be worse, I thought to myself.

"I, Kakeryu Sorano—"

Ah, he'd messed up his own name.

I giggled. *Okay, I'm keeping this video forever.*

It'd remain a keepsake—a celebration of my first love and heartbreak.

Thinking about that made me start to cry again.

Ugh, this hurts.

It really hurts.

But then, with those thoughts were spinning around my mind, I heard it.

"I, Kakeru Sorano, like Koharu Fuyutsukiiiii! I want to go out with herrrrr!"

The timing genuinely couldn't have been worse.

Kakeru had just said he liked me.

It made me happy. It really did. There was no way it wouldn't have.

But at the same time, I told myself I couldn't feel that way.

I couldn't let this go any further. If I did, I'd end up hurting Kakeru.

So I made up my mind.

I decided to quietly disappear from everybody's lives.

If I were to see Kakeru again, I'd pretend not to know him.

I'd keep going until he gave up on me. Until he forgot about me.

"I'm sure it'll be hard for him…," I muttered to myself.

It was at that point that I realized tears were streaming down my face.

For the first time in my life, I truly reviled my fate.

Not only was my life being stolen—so were these feelings that mattered so much to me.

It was miserable, frustrating, agonizing.

The more I thought about having to forget Kakeru, the more of a mess I became. I cried my eyes out. I didn't know what to do, and I was understandably worried about my health. The harder I thought about it all, the more pain it caused me. I was in so much agony that I was at a complete loss.

Eventually, it all got too much for me, and I screamed and hurled my phone across the room.

*

"Why won't you just give up on me?!"

Fuyutsuki had her arms pressed against her eyes, tears streaming down her face.

"I—"

Sobbing, her words came out in short bursts.

"—don't have much time left."

She bawled uncontrollably.

"I'm going to die anyway."

It was such a cruel thing to say.

Fuyutsuki was scared.

Her physical condition made it impossible to even imagine that she might live to see the next day. That was what made moving forward so unbearably scary to her.

It was like she was running through the darkness of night with her eyes shut. She couldn't bring herself to drag anyone else into her suffering, so she'd chosen to go at it alone.

What could I do to help her in that situation? I loved her so much.

"Fuyutsuki, can you see me?"

I took her hand and placed it on my cheek.

I moved my face close enough to hers to kiss her, and we looked into each other's eyes.

She couldn't see my face, of course, but she could still touch it and feel out my expression.

The unexpected move I'd made initially left her taken aback—but gradually, she started to become annoyed instead.

"What are you smiling about?!" she shouted.

I'd been giving her the biggest smile I could muster.

“Because.”

“Because *what*? None of this is a joke to me!”

“Because…,” I said again.

“They say smiles scare cancer away, right?”

“Huh?”

Fuyutsuki’s eyes widened in surprise.

“It’s pretty hard to smile when nobody else is smiling, isn’t it?” I said.

Fuyutsuki still looked stunned.

“Why don’t you joke around with me? Maybe you need someone you can do that with.”

Tears were still pouring from Fuyutsuki’s eyes, but I couldn’t tell whether she was laughing or crying anymore.

“As if!” she exclaimed. “Kakeru… You big dummy.”

It had been so long since she’d last called me Kakeru.

I took it as a sign that Fuyutsuki had finally given in.

I didn’t know why, but my heart felt full, and my vision began to blur with tears.

One by one, they began to fall.

“I knew it…”

“What?”

“Sometimes, Fuyutsuki, I saw you smirking… And the other day, you said that bookmark was *your* bookmark. A long time ago, you told me you made it *after* you started college.”

“Did I?”

“You did. I remember everything you’ve ever said.”

She punched me lightly on the shoulder. Well, technically, she swung her fist down and my shoulder just happened to be there.

I reacted with an “Ow,” and Fuyutsuki started throwing a tantrum.

“Dummy, dummy, dummy.”

It was adorable.

“Do you know how it felt—”

She kept thumping me.

“—for me to hold it in?”

Large tears fell from her eyes onto the floor.

My response was simple.

“Thank you.”

“You dummy! What are you thanking me for?”

She’d ended up hitting me pretty hard.

“I mean, it was for my own good, right?”

Fuyutsuki stayed silent.

She stayed silent for a brief moment, but before long, she started thumping me and calling me a dummy again.

“Kakeru?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for confessing your feelings to me twice.”

“No problem,” I said with a nod.

“Sorry,” Fuyutsuki replied.

“For lying?”

“Well, for that as well.”

“Then what else are you sorry for?”

“For being so sick.”

“That’s okay. You’re going to get better, right?” I said, stroking her hair.

“My chances of survival are incredibly low.”

I wasn’t going to give up on her, though.

“You’ll be fine,” I told her. “You’ll get through this.”

Tears had begun to fall from Fuyutsuki’s eyes once again.

“I’ll try my best,” she said, nodding.

“I believe in you.”

“I’ll try my hardest, so don’t lose faith in me.”

Her face was screwed up from crying and stained with tears, but she kept nodding and repeating “I’ll try my best.”

“Maybe I’ll come to Hokkaido with you,” I said.

“No way. Stay in college.”

“I’ll visit you during our longer breaks.”

“That’ll be expensive.”

“I’ll get a part-time job.”

After that lighthearted squabble, we held hands, and we shared the feelings we’d been keeping inside for so long, talking and laughing together.

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*

“How do I look? Does it suit me?”

Fuyutsuki spread out her yukata, smiling at me.

It was the middle of October, and it had been decided that Fuyutsuki would go to the hospital in Hokkaido once she was strong enough to do so.

The day before her transfer, I got permission to take Fuyutsuki out. We were going to campus to launch the fireworks we’d bought that day in Asakusabashi.

When I went to pick Fuyutsuki up from her hospital room, she’d already changed into her yukata. Her mom must have helped her put it on.

“It looks good, right?” her mom said to me with a smile.

The white fabric of her yukata had what looked like a subtle fireworks pattern on it, and it was tied up with a spider lily–patterned obi. With the nape of her neck exposed, she looked like a quintessential Japanese beauty.

Modern clothes like dresses and blouses looked great on her, but it turned out that traditional Japanese dress suited her perfectly as well.

She blushed, looking anxious. After all, she couldn’t see my reaction.

“Does it not suit me?” Fuyutsuki asked apprehensively.

“If you entered a yukata contest, you’d definitely win.”

“Give me a more straightforward compliment,” she said with a pout.

“You look very beautiful.”

Seemingly satisfied with my appraisal, Fuyutsuki spun around, taking small steps. Then she came to a stop, facing the direction of my voice.

“I finally got to wear it,” she said, her voice tinged with emotion.

She’d been able to dress up in the yukata she’d wanted to wear before getting hospitalized.

That in itself felt like a miracle.

Fuyutsuki’s light hadn’t gone out. Instead, it seemed to be bringing color to my days.

“I finally got to show off to you, Kakeru. I want you to remember this forever.”

“This…is something I’ll never forget.”

“Yippee,” she said with a smile as I took her by the hand.

By the time we made it to campus, Narumi and Hayase had already gotten the fireworks ready for us.

"This one's a big'un!"

Narumi and Hayase raised their hands, standing on the edge of the grass.

Narumi lit the fuse of one of the fireworks we'd bought at the specialist store in Asakusabashi, ostentatiously called the God of Thunder.

It soared into the sky with a *whoosh*. For a moment, there was silence—but the next instant, the firework exploded, tearing through the darkness.

A dull *bang, bang, bang* echoed around us, and the smell of gunpowder filled the night sky.

The quad was bathed in a kaleidoscope of colors—red, blue, yellow.

"What an incredible sound!"

Fuyutsuki was so happy that she started bouncing up and down on the lawn dressed in her yukata.

She seemed to be having a great time.

"Tell me what you see," she whispered, holding my hand.

I described the fireworks to her, explaining how the red, blue, and yellow fireworks were painting the night sky in color.

"…I'm so glad," she said, looking as though she was on the brink of tears again.

As the fanfare reverberated through the night, the golden light of the fireworks sparkled and shimmered in the air.

After most of the fireworks had been set off, Hayase and Narumi called out to Fuyutsuki.

"Good luck in Hokkaido, Koharu."

"We're rootin' for ya!"

Fuyutsuki smiled.

"Just you wait. I'm going to come back fit as a fiddle!"

Then she paused and suddenly pursed her lips.

"I won't be doing any more disappearing acts," she said, gripping the hem of her yukata tightly.

She was probably thinking about how she'd vanished without telling anyone. An apologetic look was written all over her face, and Hayase and Narumi exchanged glances.

"Of course you won't," replied Hayase.

"Next time, we're gonna put a GPS tracker on ya," Narumi joked.

Hearing the two of them laugh, Fuyutsuki appeared to tear up with relief.

“Anyway, there’re still some more fireworks left. I’ll go set ’em off,” said Narumi.

“Are you okay, Koharu?” asked Hayase. “Do you need to sit down? Are you sure you’re not cold?”

We continued watching the fireworks for a little while longer.

Holding my hand, Fuyutsuki whispered something only I could hear.

“I’m so glad to have the two of them as friends.” She smiled in my direction. “I’m sure you feel the same way.”

*

After saying good-bye to Hayase and Narumi, I took Fuyutsuki back to the hospital.

As I was chaperoning her from the taxi to her hospital room, she put a hand on my left elbow.

“This is the last day we’ll be able to see each other for a while, so just hold on a little longer.”

She wasn’t explicitly admitting she wanted to be with me, but her grip on my arm tightened nonetheless. I suggested we swing by our usual spot, and we started making our way to the hospital’s rooftop garden.

It was empty, so we had the place all to ourselves.

“That breeze is really nice,” she said.

It was the first time we’d been out in the garden at night.

Tokyo is so bright at nighttime that sometimes, it almost feels eerie.

It’s as if there’s a transparent film covering the entire metropolis that separates the darkness of the night from the lights of the city, protecting us and trapping us at the same time.

Maybe that’s why the sight of Tokyo at night makes me feel somewhat uneasy, despite how bright it is.

I wondered how the night seemed to Fuyutsuki. After all, she couldn’t see the sky.

I wanted to discuss that with her next time I got the chance.

Buildings, cars, and streetlights illuminated the garden from below.

It reminded me of a stage with lights underneath it.

The moon was the spotlight, making Fuyutsuki and me the stars of the show.

There she was, standing in her yukata, illuminated by the moonlight.

Looking at her reminded me of how helplessly in love with her I was, and my

face got hot.

"I'm glad we could finally put those fireworks we bought in Asakusabashi to use."

"I ended up keeping them in my room for a really long time."

"I had so much energy back then," said Fuyutsuki, clutching her chest. "Will you come on another date with me once I get better?"

"I'll have to think about that one."

"Meanie."

Fuyutsuki pouted sulkily, and I quickly apologized.

"Sorry, I didn't mean that. We can go on a date whenever you feel like it. I'm always ready for an outing."

"Where should we go?"

"Anywhere. The mountains, the river, shopping, a theme park."

"I want to visit the place where you were born."

"Sure. There's a sea I always used to gaze out at."

"A sea?"

Back in my hometown, the swift currents seemed to carry everything away with them—both the good and the bad.

That sea made me realize that when I emptied my mind of the good and the bad, all I was left with was the present.

No, that wasn't it.

It was because I'd met Fuyutsuki that I was able to think that way. Thanks to her, the present stayed with me, even after everything else had been washed away.

Fuyutsuki lived in the moment. It was thanks to her that I'd been able to break down the walls I'd created for myself. She had been the one who'd changed my cynical outlook.

I wanted to go and see those waters with Fuyutsuki, the person who'd changed me.

I held her hand, filled with a deep love and gratitude toward her. She might not have been able to see, but I still wanted us to stroll along the water together and enjoy the sea breeze.

"I'll be looking forward to that. I have to stay alive until then," Fuyutsuki said, looking up.

It was as if she was gazing up at the transparent film created by the Tokyo night.

If I started chatting away about some creepy idea I'd made up in my mind,

though, Fuyutsuki would probably just laugh it off.

I got the feeling that no matter how dark it was, nothing would stop Fuyutsuki from running into the night.

“We got sparklers when we bought those fireworks in Asakusabashi, too,” I said.

“Can we do them here?”

“Probably not.”

“Yeah, I guessed as much,” Fuyutsuki said, laughing.

“Still, who’s gonna catch us?” I asked. “A little rule breaking never hurt anybody.”

“Are you trying to make me your accomplice?”

“Actually, I’m trying to turn you into the main culprit.”

“There you go again,” said Fuyutsuki. She was taken aback, but she still laughed. “Let’s have a competition to see whose sparkler lasts the longest. Do you have a lighter?”

“Yeah, I brought one with me.”

“You must have been pretty determined to set them off.”

Fuyutsuki crouched down and pulled on my arm.

“We need to get a little closer, or the wind will blow it out.”

“If you wanna snuggle up together, you could’ve just asked.”

“All right then, let’s snuggle.”

Fuyutsuki nestled close to me, sheltering from the wind. I caught a whiff of her smell, which made me feel relaxed.

I lit the sparklers with my lighter, and the glow illuminated Fuyutsuki’s face. We huddled together, watching them burn.

The sparklers crackled and glimmered as we held them in our hands.

I hoped Fuyutsuki’s sparkler would last longer than mine.

I hoped she’d live longer than I did, even if just by a second. I wished that from the bottom of my heart.

Sparks fizzled and scattered from the sparklers’ swollen, glowing red tips. They stretched out like flower stems, before blooming with light and vanishing in an instant.

That flickering pattern of light and loss repeated over and over again as the sparklers continued to burn.

If those scattered sparks were what caused the sparklers to burn out faster, then I wished they’d just hold them in. That way, they could keep burning for longer.

I glanced at the girl beside me.

Fuyutsuki was smiling happily, her face illuminated by the faint glow.

When I saw her smile, I realized I was wrong.

Those sparklers were glowing brilliantly and lending someone else their light. To me, there was nothing more wonderful than that.

I wanted them to shine as brightly as they could and continue to shine until they were completely satisfied.

That was what I wished for as I crouched next to the person I loved.

Burn. Keep burning.

Don't go out.

I channeled those small prayers into the sparkler I was holding.

At that moment, however, one of the sparks went out.

Only one crackling sparkler remained.

"Oh, mine went out first," I said.

Fuyutsuki chuckled.

"You always tell such kind lies, don't you, Kakeru?" she said, smiling. She seemed to be looking at my sparkler, still burning in my hand.

It made me feel awkward that she'd found me out.

Then I came up with an idea.

"We still have some more sparklers left. Let's have a rematch."

"This time, don't lie to me."

"Come a little closer, then."

I lit two new sparklers.

They sputtered and scattered their sparks around, and glowing red balls formed at the ends of the rods.

I brought my spark closer to Fuyutsuki's.

The two sparks seemed to cling to each other, merging into one large one.

They made a crackling noise as large sparks flew around them.

"What did you do, Kakeru?" Fuyutsuki asked curiously.

"I put our sparklers together. I thought it might make them burn longer."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! It's not a competition anymore, then, is it?"

"Well, no." I gazed at the larger spark, praying for it not to go out. "Still, you know, I hope your spark keeps on burning for a really long time—even if it only lasts a second longer than mine."

When I glanced at Fuyutsuki's face beside me, I could see tears welling up in her eyes.

She rested her head on my shoulder, then asked me a question, her voice soft.

“What will you do if I die first?”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s just a hypothetical.”

I didn’t want to imagine life without Fuyutsuki. She was so deeply embedded in the core of my being.

So I was honest with her.

“I don’t think I could handle it. Yeah. If you die, I want to die with you.”

“I knew you’d say that.”

“Was that too heavy?”

“No, but I’m not happy with your answer. I want the person I love to live a long life.”

Our conversation appeared to be taking a dark turn.

It felt like death was still haunting us both.

Instead, I wanted to discuss the future.

I was suddenly reminded of her yellow bookmark—the one that had blown away in the wind and fluttered off into the sky.

“The yellow bookmark.”

“My bookmark?”

“Is there anything else you want to do in the future, aside from the things you wrote on it?” I asked.

Fuyutsuki paused for a moment, then simply said, “No.”

“Your tone of voice suggests otherwise,” I responded.

“*This* might be a bit too heavy, don’t you think?”

“Heavy is totally fine by me.”

“Don’t laugh at me, then.”

“I won’t.”

She seemed to have resigned herself to telling me, and one by one, Fuyutsuki told me all the wishes she’d been keeping in her heart.

They were magnificent.

“I know it’s clichéd, but I want to wear a wedding dress.”

“Okay.”

“I want to go on a honeymoon, too.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere’s fine—as long as it’s warm and relaxing.”

“Got it.”

“And I want at least one child.”

“Sure.”

“And they’ll wear the same kimono that I wore at my *Shichi-Go-San* ceremony.”

“Right.”

“Once they’re in elementary school, I want to go to Parents’ Day. That might be difficult, though, since I can’t see.”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“I want to go on plenty of family vacations, too.”

“Leave it to me.”

“And I want my daughter to wear a formal kimono at her coming-of-age ceremony.”

“I’ll learn how to put one on.”

“We can’t devote ourselves solely to our family, though. I want the two of us to go on dates every so often.”

“Understood.”

“And I want to go to my children’s weddings. They’ll write letters to their parents, and when they read mine out, I’ll bawl my eyes out.”

“I expect I’ll cry, too.”

At that point, Fuyutsuki nuzzled me with her head. “It’s so embarrassing,” she said.

“There’s lots of things you want to do, then.”

“I guess there are.”

I was relieved.

Now that I knew Fuyutsuki’s heartfelt wishes, I felt a sense of hope envelop me.

“You have to stay alive,” I told her.

“Yeah. I’ll live a long life. I promise.”

The large combined spark had lasted slightly longer than they had individually, but it had still gone out a while ago. Yet even so, the fire in our hearts kept burning.

“Did it go out?” Fuyutsuki asked.

“Yeah.”

“Is that it for today, then?” she said, sounding disappointed.

I handed her something.

“What’s this?”

Fuyutsuki moved her fingertips over the small voice recorder, taking it in.

“I recorded myself reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*.”

“The whole thing?”

“Yep. My throat was pretty hoarse afterward.”

“No way! You really recorded the whole thing?! Thank you!”

Fuyutsuki laughed as she wrapped her arm around mine.

“I’ll send some flowers to your hospital room in Hokkaido.”

“You will?” She sounded overjoyed, and her face turned red.

“Spider lilies. Do you know what it means to give someone spider lilies?”

“‘I believe in you,’ right?”

“You knew that already?”

“Well, I *did* always have them decorating my room.”

“Do you know their other meaning, then?”

“They have another meaning?”

I looked up at the night sky as I told her what it was.

“‘To a faraway place.’”

“…A faraway place?”

I squeezed her hand.

“I believe in you, as you journey off to a faraway place.”

That was what I told Fuyutsuki, who would be heading off to battle her horrific disease in a faraway city.

“Get better while you’re there. I’ll keep believing in you when you’re off in a faraway place.”

“Kakeru,” Fuyutsuki said, her voice laced with emotion.

“Yeah?”

“I’m really glad I fell in love with you.”

She pressed her face against the edge of my shoulder.

Our lips touched.

The excitement instantly sent my heart racing.

I almost wished our lips would meld and we’d come together as one, just like our sparklers had.

It mustn’t have even lasted ten seconds, but the happiness I felt kissing her seemed so much longer—as though we’d kissed for a whole minute, or an hour.

Once our lips parted, Fuyutsuki felt around with her hands and pulled me into an embrace.

“I’ll keep trying for a little longer,” she said earnestly.

Fuyutsuki’s cancer came back over and over again, and she fought it every time.

Eventually, though, the wretched illness snatched her life away from me.

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§

I'd spent the night at the office—again. From four until seven in the morning, I slept with my face planted on my desk.

That evening, during our presentation to our client, I mistakenly referred to them by the wrong name. Maybe it was because I'd been rushing to compile a report for a different client right up until we left, or maybe I was just sleep-deprived. Either way, the atmosphere in the room frosted over for a moment until the manager of the client company diffused the tension with an awkward smile, reassuring me that it was no big deal.

He'd probably gone easy on me because I was young, and part of me felt frustrated by that idea. There was another part of me, however, that was relieved, and I felt so ashamed I almost cried.

After we left the client's building, my boss shot me an exasperated look.

"You can go home now, Hayase," he said with a sigh.

"But I have to compile a report for a different company once I get back."

"You can deal with that tomorrow. There's a fireworks display tonight, so the trains are going to be busy." Then he added softly, "Go home and get some sleep."

Was he suggesting I put off my massive workload and pull an all-nighter the day after instead?

I would have preferred to make a start on it as soon as possible. That way, I could leave work before the last train both that day *and* the next.

My boss's only job was to delegate the work. He had no grasp of how much I had to do.

He always went home early. Unlike me, his complexion was positively glowing, which infuriated me to no end.

"I still have work to do, so I'll head back to the office."

"Not if you're going to make mistakes like getting the client's name wrong. Consider this an order from your boss."

I couldn't argue with that.

As I was standing there, my boss announced that he was off to entertain some clients in Shiodome. He raised his hand and got into a taxi.

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In the summer of my fourth year of college, I got a job offer from an event planning company.

I must have been pretty good at job interviews, because I'd received offers from several other places, including manufacturers and IT companies. Since I'd always been fascinated by the more glamorous side of the business world, however, I decided to go with this one.

I'd been working there for four years by that point, yet I didn't really have any memories from that period of my life.

All I could remember was spending all my time at the office.

More than half my cohort had quit. They complained about the unreasonable workload and said they didn't understand what they were working for and that they'd rather be dead than work there.

Some of my remaining colleagues who were a few years older than me had started to adopt a more philosophical approach. They'd claim, "You're not a true working adult until you start to question whether you're working to live or living to work."

I, too, had lost sight of what I was working for.

When I first joined, I'd put all of my effort into learning how to do the job. It was often tough, but I found it fulfilling to channel all of my efforts into something.

Whenever someone needed me, I'd work my fingers to the bone trying to help them.

That was probably just my nature.

Recently, though, I'd stopped feeling any sense of accomplishment. I had no time to spare, and I just felt empty.

The clients I was working for had their own families and children to think about, though, and promotional activities like what my company handled had a huge impact on the success of our clients.

The reality of that had sunk in shortly after I'd joined the company. I couldn't bring myself to quit or slack off, no matter how hard things got.

Mom had also noticed I'd been getting home late every day, and she'd started to say, "What are you working so hard for?"

I understood why she was asking that.

I didn't understand why I was working so hard, either.

Still, it wasn't like I could just throw in the towel or reduce my workload.

Even if I *did* get my workload cut down, it was obvious that it would just get passed on to someone else.

Thinking about these things made me anxious, so a year earlier, I'd ended up moving out of my parents' house, declaring that "I'd make my own decisions." I knew my mom was just worried about me, though.

The apartment I'd rented functioned solely as a place to rest my head at night. The refrigerator was bare, and I only used the washing machine once a week.

The room was empty—much like me. I'd sacrificed almost all of myself to the company.

Why was I doing it? What did I think I'd achieve slaving away so hard?

"I'm tired."

My future self could figure something out in the morning. I stopped thinking and decided to go home and rest.

I just wanted to sleep. My legs were weak, and I was already breaking out in a cold sweat.

Asakusa was crowded with people heading up the Sumida River.

I pushed against the flood of people as I made my way to Asakusa Station. All of a sudden, I became unsteady on my feet, and I bumped into someone with a *thud*.

"Sorry," I said automatically.

The person *tsked* at me.

"Watch where you're going. You blind or something?" they spat before walking away.

For some reason, their comment triggered memories of my college days. Memories of one of my close friends.

Koharu Fuyutsuki.

Koharu was blind.

Even though she couldn't see, she'd never become pessimistic about her life. She'd gone to college, found a boyfriend, and always challenged herself to do whatever she wanted.

"What would Koharu do in my position?"

I first met Koharu at the entrance ceremony.

There I was, surrounded by about five hundred new students in suits at an event hall in Hamamatsucho. It was the first time I'd ever worn a suit, and I suddenly felt like I was standing on the precipice of adulthood. It was nerve-racking.

I wasn't used to wearing my high-heeled shoes, and they made my toes hurt. Just as I was sitting there thinking how much I hated wearing a suit, I noticed the

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girl next to me—Koharu—was wearing a formal dress like a celebrity might wear.

I was jealous. I never could have worn one myself, though, petrified as I was of standing out.

When the entrance ceremony ended and everyone started leaving, Koharu stayed glued to her seat.

I tried to speak to her, but the first time I tried calling out to her, she didn't respond. I assumed she was ignoring me, but then she slowly rose to her feet, holding a white cane that had been leaning against her chair.

"Are you…blind?" I asked hesitantly.

"Oh. Yes, I am," Koharu replied cheerfully.

As I accompanied her out of the hall, I told her that my name was Hayase and that we were in the same course.

I don't remember how the conversation had ended up there, but I said, "Your dress really suits you."

It didn't feel like I was just giving her a simple compliment, either; my words were loaded with a mixture of feelings, including how much I admired her for not caring what other people thought of her.

"My mom said I should probably wear a suit, since that's what everyone else would be wearing, but seeing as it's a special occasion, I chose to wear what *I* liked. I can't see it myself, but does it look nice?"

Koharu smiled shyly and did a twirl for me.

At that moment, I felt a shock run through my entire body.

"You're incredible," I muttered.

Looking back on it now, my lack of confidence had led me to give up on a lot of things in life.

I never raised my hand in class, and I always stayed silent when they were assigning roles for the athletics meet or brainstorming ideas for our class project for the cultural festival. Although I was interested in joining the student council, I didn't feel confident enough to put myself forward. I was even too timid to shorten my skirt.

However, after that entrance ceremony, I decided to dye my hair.

It wasn't something I made up my mind to do, exactly, but an act driven by sheer embarrassment. When I realized I was jealous that Koharu was blind, I felt so ashamed that I ended up hating myself for it.

I wanted to be as incredible as her.

I looked up how to do makeup and tried to wear fancier clothes. For me, it

was a form of armor.

Having donned that armor, I decided to start pretending to be confident.

I wanted to know more about Koharu. Then, one day, I spotted a poster asking for volunteers to become student guides.

The more I got to know Koharu, the more incredible I thought she was.

I almost idolized her.

She was my best friend and my idol.

What would Koharu do?

She kept on smiling no matter how hopeless things seemed.

She followed her heart.

She wouldn't waste time dwelling on how hard things were. She'd smile and look toward the future.

It was impossible to picture Koharu without a smile on her face.

"The only thing I've laughed at lately is myself," I said, letting out another self-deprecating chuckle. "It's not like work's gonna kill me."

I wanted to smile like Koharu did.

I wanted to live in a way that left a mark on somebody's heart.

Was it too late for that?

Turning that question over in my mind, I made a call.

The person on the other end picked up on the second ring, and I heard a kind, familiar voice.

"Mom."

"What's wrong?"

When I heard her voice, I almost wanted to bite my tongue and forget everything I'd planned to tell her—but I knew that if I didn't say it then, I might never find the courage to.

"I'm sorry for springing this on you, Mom, but I've decided to quit my job. Can I move back home? It'd be a waste to keep paying rent."

I knew it was a selfish request.

Having left home in such a defiant manner, I braced myself for a scolding.

My palms had gotten sweaty as I spoke.

But when I heard her react, she sounded happy.

"Oh, that's wonderful news! It'll be wonderful to have someone who can help around the house again. Your dad doesn't lift a finger, you know," she said, before launching into a list of complaints about Dad.

I didn't know if it was relief or because I'd finally found the courage to quit, but my eyes were starting to sting.

“Are you listening?”

Mom’s gentle voice rang in my ear.

As I stood in the middle of the crowded street teeming with fireworks festival attendees, I felt like I was going to cry.

At that moment, there was a *bang*, and a massive firework exploded over the Sumida River.

Bang, bang, bang. A succession of fireworks erupted up above me.

In middle school and high school, I’d struggled to express my true self. It was only after meeting Koharu in college that I’d finally learned to go after the things I wanted.

Once I’d entered the workforce, however, I had once again suppressed my personal ambitions. It had been of my own doing.

I reminisced over my free-spirited college days. I’d worked as a volunteer, helped organize the student festivals, and planned the Children’s Fireworks event. The enthusiasm I’d felt came rushing back.

“Sorry, Mom, the fireworks just started. I’ll call you again soon.”

I hung up and turned back around, joining the throng of people making their way toward the site of the fireworks display.

Strangely, my tiredness seemed to have evaporated.

What kind of job should I try next? Maybe I should start my own company.

I wanted to do something that would actually help people.

As these thoughts raced through my mind, the fireworks exploded with resounding *boom*s, shaking me to my core.

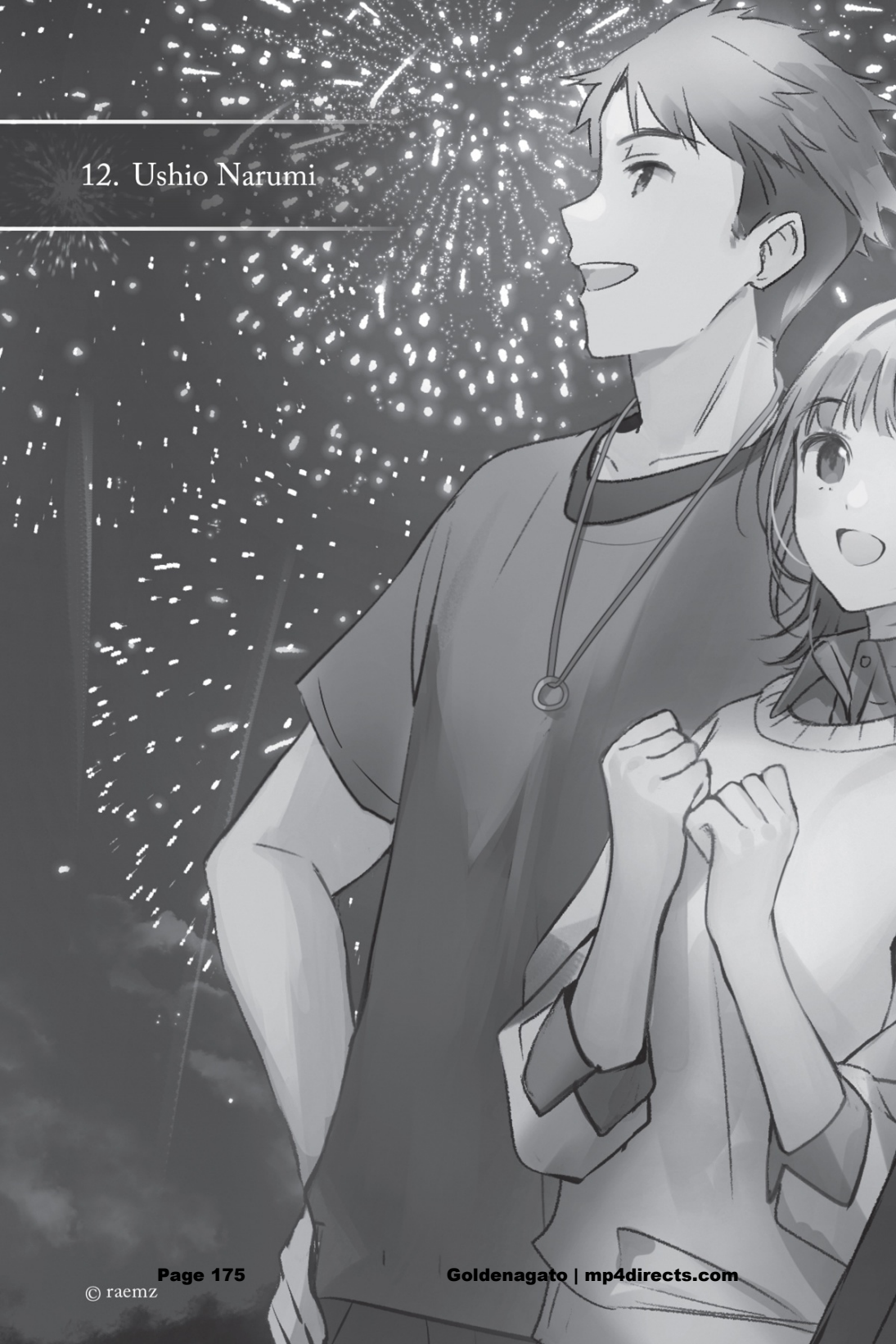
My mind was overflowing with ideas.

“I can’t wait to get started!”

For the first time in a long while, I felt a genuine smile spread across my face.

A large flower lit up the night sky above me.

12. Ushio Narumi



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At the scheduled time, I sounded the long steam whistle three times and set sail on the ferry, called *Hibiki*.

It was late in the afternoon, but the sun was still high in the sky. I could see the vivid blue horizon from the captain's cabin.

After earning my third-grade maritime officer qualification in college, I'd started working for a domestic ferry company—a career path viewed at school as one that "failures" ended up going down. Still, I spent the next dozen years or so working my way up as a navigator, and by the time I was forty, I'd been given the responsibility of captaining a voyage.

Some of my college classmates who'd also become navigators were now captains of international cargo ships, sailing across the vast oceans of the world. These "successful" friends of mine earned more than three times my salary. Whenever we met up, they'd talk about narrow trenches and pirate-infested waters in oceans I'd never even heard of. All I had to bring to the table was local knowledge, like how the tides in the Kanmon Straits between Yamaguchi and Kyushu could change direction depending on how high they were, so I tended to keep my mouth shut during our conversations.

The navigation program I'd graduated from took in forty students every year, but it was eventually split into two groups of twenty based on test results from the first two years. One group did an onboard training course, while the other took a course in marine engineering. Since only those who did the onboard training course could obtain a deck officer qualification, many students who'd enrolled with dreams of becoming navigators were able to achieve that goal based off their grades. As a result, many of my friends in the program took attending our lectures far more seriously than people in other courses.

Even so, I'd still ranked near the top of the class.

I think everyone had assumed I'd end up at a famous trading company. So when my classmates discovered I'd accepted a position at a ferry company—and a local one, no less—they were shocked. Some teased me, assuming I'd failed in my job search, and when I explained that it was a deliberate choice I'd made, they were even more puzzled.

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“The pay is great,” they kept saying, trying to convince me. “You can enjoy yourself as much as you like when you’re abroad.”

But I just laughed it off, telling them I couldn’t care less.

I had an older brother with Down syndrome. My dream of becoming a navigator had been partly driven by my desire to support my family financially.

However, when the question of finding a job arose, I realized I couldn’t care for my brother *and* be a navigator.

You were forced to spend an extremely long time at sea; once you were on an international cargo ship, you could be away for six months to a year. I realized that if anything happened to my brother, I wouldn’t be able to help.

A domestic ferry company, on the other hand, would allow me to rush and see him whenever I needed to. Hence why I’d chosen to work for one.

I got the call just before leaving port.

My brother had collapsed at his care facility.

My parents were with him, but he’d been calling out my name in a panic.

When I started my job, I’d told my family I’d have plenty of time to spare, since I’d ship out in the evenings and finish work the next morning.

The ferry was cruising through the Seto Inland Sea at a speed of twenty knots. Normally, I found the ferry’s leisurely pace delightful, but on this occasion, it felt excruciatingly slow. If it were any other day, the vastness of the ocean would excite me, but right now, I was just desperate to reach our destination.

There was limited cell phone service out at sea, so I had no idea how my brother was doing.

Is he okay? Is he gonna be okay? C’mon, just stick it out a little longer.

I gripped the ship’s wheel, my palms sweaty. I wanted to turn back and go and see my brother. The thought of jumping off the deck and swimming back to Izumiotsu Port crossed my mind, regardless of how stupid it was.

I used to hate my brother when I was in elementary school.

He went to the same school as I did, but he was in a special needs class called the Sparkle Class.

One day, he started running through the corridors, shouting at the top of his lungs. The kids in my class made fun of me for it, and I ended up getting into fistfights. I was embarrassed that I was getting harassed because of my brother.

It was the atmosphere at home that I really couldn’t stand, though. I wasn’t

allowed to get embarrassed there.

I was told to accept that my brother was disabled and forced to walk to and from school with him every day. I never once said it out loud, but as an elementary school student, it made no sense to me.

My grandfather lived nearby, and he was the only person who let me complain about my brother.

To me, the freedom to do that was a godsend.

Once I started middle school, my classmates grew up and stopped mocking my brother. Still, I began to feel a barrier between me and them. I was in the baseball club, and while my teammates weren't allowed to skip practice even when they had a cold, I was given special treatment because of my situation at home. I kept hoping one of my teammates would say "What does that have to do with anything?" But they never did.

I gradually started feeling too awkward to show up at practice, and in the end, I quit the club altogether, using my brother as the excuse.

What kind of life was this? Would I always have to live under the cloud of my brother's condition?

During that dark period of my life, my grandfather passed away.

I cried all the way through the wake and funeral.

All I could do was cry.

My brother, on the other hand, was different.

He called out to my grandfather's casket as it was being carried away.

"Thank you. Thank you for looking out for Ushio."

That was when I realized he'd been paying attention to me all along.

That was the first time I took notice of how my brother felt.

I'd spent all my time worrying about myself and never once considered *his* feelings.

It was at that moment I made a vow to myself.

The ferry had just passed Kobe, having departed from Izumiotsu. I was in a hurry, but no matter how impatient I got, I wasn't going to be able to go ashore until six the next morning.

The whole situation sucked.

As I sitting in the wheelhouse with my head drooped, I heard a faint *bang*.

Colorful fireworks were being set off in the distance.

"Fireworks are great, aren't they?"

Suddenly, memories of a friend from my college days came rushing back to

me.

She was the girlfriend of my best friend—a guy I'd spent all four years of college with.

Her name was Koharu Fuyutsuki.

Fuyutsuki was blind, but even after losing her sight and falling ill, she hadn't lost her passion for life. One time, I'd set off fireworks with Fuyutsuki, Hayase, and my best friend Kakeru.

He'd once asked Fuyutsuki why she liked fireworks even though she couldn't see them. I could still remember her response.

"I think fireworks leave a mark on your heart.

"Even now, when I'm feeling down, those memories of looking up at the sky keep me going.

"I want to live in a way that leaves a mark on somebody's heart, too."

Fuyutsuki's smile flashed through my mind.

"Yeah. I gotta keep my head up high, too."

As soon as I said that out loud, my anxiety dissipated.

I managed to calm down, realizing I needed to focus on what I could do.

Wiping away my tears, I picked up the microphone for the ship's PA system.

"Good evening, passengers. I apologize for the disturbance. I just wanted to let you know that there's a fireworks display tonight at Kobe Port…"

A large flower bloomed in the night sky with a *bang*, only to fade away again.

The fireworks dyed the city of Kobe red, blue, yellow, and orange, their glittering colors blending in with the town's nightscape.

There were far more here than the small display we'd held in college—yet no other fireworks had ever left such a mark on my heart.

I didn't get to see my friends from back then very often anymore.

Hayase had set up a nonprofit organization and seemed to be traveling all around the world.

As for Sorano… I hoped he was doing okay.

The last time I'd seen him, he was in a state of total despair.

It had been Fuyutsuki's funeral.

It wasn't as though he'd given up on life, but I'd been able to tell he was putting on a brave face for me.

I wondered if he'd managed to bounce back.

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I was sure he'd be fine. Holding on to that belief, I decided to call him the next time I had the chance.

I'd talk to him about the Kanmon Straits that flowed past his hometown, and how fast they were.

As I watched the fireworks glittering in the distance, I thought about what I'd talk to him about.

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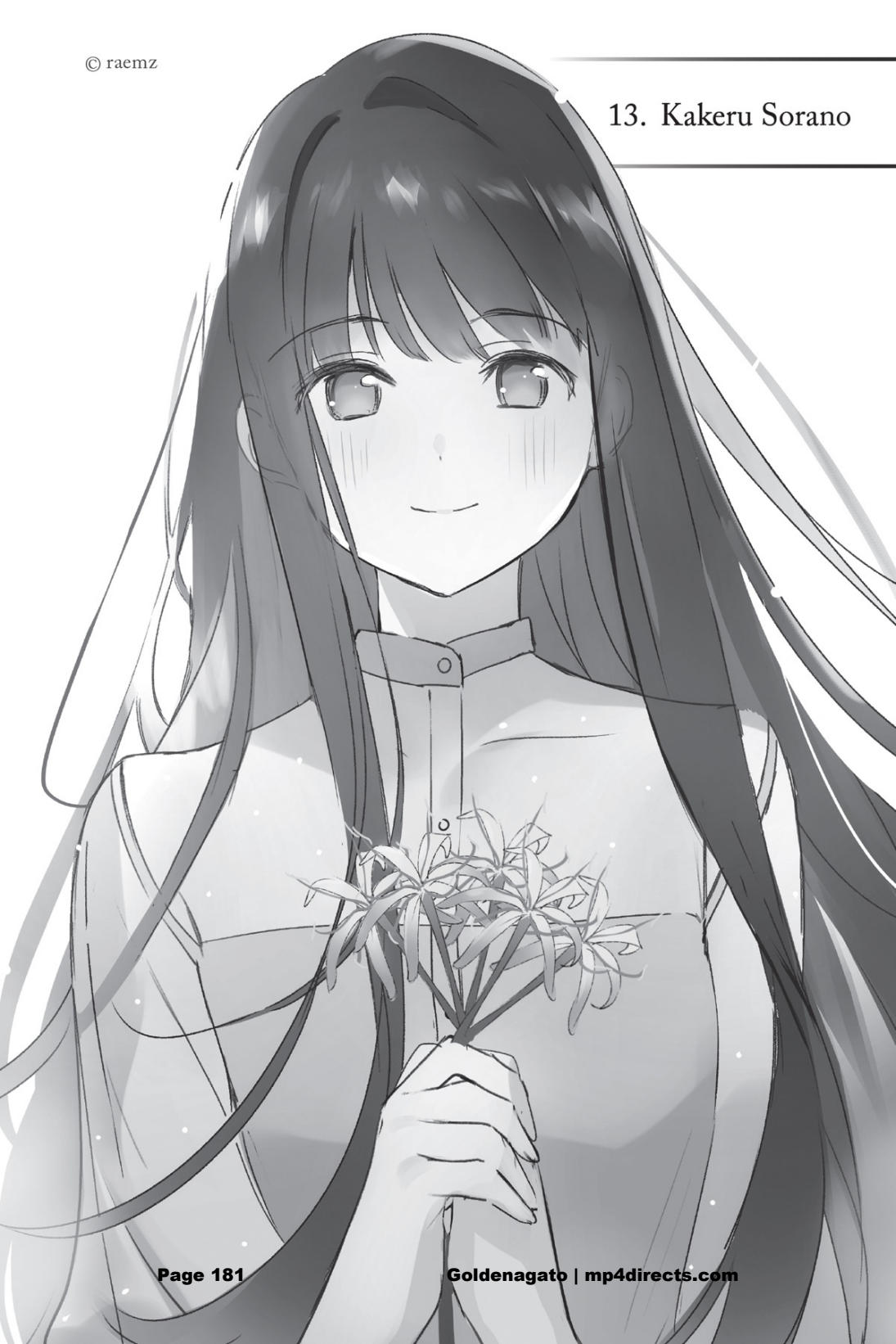
13. Kakeru Sorano



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The doctor was standing by the bed, holding his hands behind his back.

Flowers decorated the windowsill, their white heads blooming at the end of long, thick stalks.

They almost looked like fireworks exploding in the night sky. Every time the white curtains fluttered in the breeze, I could smell the sweet scent of the flowers.

The doctor spoke again.

I should have been prepared for what he was about to say—but my voice came out intermingled with tears.

"I've had enough. Let's end this."

"Please don't give up, Sorano," the doctor said, offering some encouragement.

Soon after Koharu passed away, I was diagnosed with colon cancer.

When they discovered that same old adversary that had taken Koharu's life in my body, I'd been determined to defeat it.

The treatment, however, was futile. The cancer spread to my liver and then to my lungs. It was already stage IV—what they called "terminal." Every day since my diagnosis had been a rollercoaster.

To tell the truth, I was exhausted.

The repeated surgeries and the severe side effects of the medication were a lot to deal with.

As the painful treatments continued, it gradually became too much to handle.

Eventually, I ended up abandoning treatment altogether.

It was nighttime when Sakura came into the hospital room with some flowers.

"Why do you look so lifeless, Dad? Mom will get mad at you in heaven."

Sakura Sorano was twenty-five. She was Koharu's and my only child.

Koharu had continued battling her illness for two years—ever since her first year of college—before she was finally able to be discharged.

She had been told she only had six months to live, so this was nothing short of a miracle.

She'd taken a break from college to battle her cancer, but once she recovered, she came back and finished her studies.

After that, we got married, and we were blessed with a child.

Koharu never gave up.

However, when she was forty-five years old, Koharu was diagnosed with breast cancer.

She'd battled the disease all over again. But three years ago, she'd passed away, leaving our daughter and me behind.

When the strength drained from Koharu's body and her pulse stopped, and the doctor delivered the news, I felt more numb than sad. *Oh, she's really gone*, I'd thought in a listless daze. It had taken a while for her death to actually sink in.

Koharu's mother had insisted on doing her beloved daughter's makeup for the funeral, but her hands had been shaking too much, and she'd broken down in tears. That was the moment Koharu's death finally hit me, and I broke down as well.

The sense of loss, that I was never going to see her again, overwhelmed me. I burst into tears, not caring who saw me.

Even now, there were times when the realization that she wasn't around anymore made me tear up.

Losing Koharu had been just that unbearable.

If I were to die as well, would I just be leaving Sakura with even more grief to deal with?

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot. I found this thing in Mom's dresser," Sakura told me.

It was an old voice recorder.

I took it from her.

"I'll change the flowers," she said, leaving my hospital room.

Once she was gone, I put the earphones in.

I pressed PLAY on the battered voice recorder, and miraculously, it still worked.

The first thing that played was my recording reading of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Honestly, my skills as a narrator were atrocious. It was painful to listen to.

I know she was my wife, but I still couldn't believe Koharu had listened to this reading for years.

At that moment, though, another recording started playing.

"Dear Kakeru."

It was Koharu's voice.

I hurriedly rewound the recording and listened to it from the beginning.

Dear Kakeru.

First of all, please forgive me for passing away before you.

I'm sorry about that. Things were hard for me this time.

I apologize for bidding you a slightly early farewell, but I hope you won't be too sad about it.

You haven't cried over my passing, have you?

Well, I guess you might have. You'll probably cry at the funeral, at the very least.

But once you've said good-bye properly, there's no need for any more tears.

You don't need to cry at all.

I mean, I don't have a single memory that makes me want to cry.

In fact, you should praise me for living so long, considering everything I've been through.

If you hadn't been around during that summer of my first year at college, my life probably would have come to an end right then and there.

But I went on to live a really long life.

I got to wear a wedding dress.

We even managed to go on a honeymoon.

But that wasn't all. You took our family to all kinds of different places.

Of course, you gave us lots of other happy memories, too.

You were a good father and a wonderful partner.

Of all the joys in my life, Sakura, the child you gave me, was the greatest.

Because of my condition, I had never expected to be able to become a mother.

Thank you. I am truly grateful that we met.

I was able to dress Sakura in the kimono I wore for my *Shichi-Go-San* ceremony.

You even took me to Parents' Day. I never imagined I'd be able to do

something like that, being blind.

I was even able to dress Sakura up in my family's best formal kimono.

I never imagined I'd get to experience so much of what it means to be a mother.

Thank you.

I even got the opportunity to attend Sakura's wedding, too.

We both cried, didn't we?

Say, Kakeru?

You're not assuming I had any regrets, are you?

When I think about it, leaving you and Sakura behind is undeniably sad. But during that summer when I was nineteen, I had already made peace with the idea of my death.

When you look at it from that perspective, do I really have anything to regret?

It all started when I gave in to your stubbornness—that day I gave up on giving up on you.

Every single day since I chose not to give up on life has been filled with joy.

Every single moment has left an imprint on my heart—just like fireworks.

Oh, I've been so happy. I've had such a wonderful life!

Thank you, Kakeru.

Thank you for meeting me. Thank you for choosing me.

Kakeru.

Are you going to be okay without me?

Whenever you feel like you're starting to lose heart, think about those fireworks we watched together.

That was my way of getting through the difficult times.

Carrying the fireworks display you held for me in my heart allowed me to keep going.

My journey might be ending here, but yours will continue on to a faraway place. I believe in you.

Before I transferred to that hospital in Hokkaido, you told me you believed in me.

Now let me say the same thing to you.

I believe in you, as you journey off to a faraway place.

I believe in you—that you'll keep going with your head held high.

Please.

Please live your life with a smile on your face."

That was the end of her message.

The voice on the recording was confident and lively rather than tearful, and I thought back to how my mother had told me that raising a child made you strong.

I clutched the recorder as if I was clinging on to the one remaining fragment of the person I loved so much. Just then, the sliding door of the hospital room clattered open.

"Oh! Dad. Why are you crying?"

"Ha-ha, sorry."

"These new flowers smell great."

Sakura placed the vase on the windowsill and repositioned the stems.

"Do you know what those flowers mean?" I asked.

"Spider lilies?" Sakura shook her head.

I told her what the flowers symbolized.

"I believe in you, as you journey off to a faraway place."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Your mother lives on in both our hearts. I'm sure she'll keep sending us that message as we journey through our lives."

Thinking that, I felt as if I could face the future again.

"Huh? Dad, you're smiling now?"

I hadn't even realized it until Sakura said something.

"They say smiling scares cancer away."

Someone had once told me to keep my head up and move forward.

That person had been Koharu Fuyutsuki.

Koharu was blind. She'd endured terrible illnesses.

Yet despite this, she'd never given up on life.

She always smiled and had a radiant presence.

Could I become like her?

Could I connect with people the way she had?

"Oh, fireworks."

Sakura pointed outside.

“Dad, they’re setting off fireworks.”

Outside the window, white flowers exploded in the night sky.

A *boom* followed a moment later.

The sight of those lights brought back memories of the Children’s Fireworks show we’d held in college.

“Sakura.”

“Yeah?”

“Could you fetch the doctor for me? I want to discuss my treatment.”

The fireworks kept going.

They lit up, bloomed, and left a mark on people’s hearts.

Could I be like those fireworks?

When I closed my eyes, I saw Koharu’s smile.

I was so glad I’d met her.

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Afterword

There are a whole host of people who played a part in bringing this novel to you. They are:

raemz, for drawing such beautiful, high-quality illustrations.

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The bookstore staff and salespeople, who brought this book to you by putting it on their shelves.

You wouldn't be reading this book if it wasn't for the support of so many people, and that thought fills me with immense gratitude.

I've always wanted to write a novel that lingers in people's hearts, just as some novels have stayed with me. The sort of novel that's so close to you it lives on deep inside your heart, that has characters who bring a smile to your face whenever you think about them, and that gives you courage whenever you lose your footing. That's the sort of novel I've always dreamed of writing.

I really hope this novel leaves that kind of a lasting impression on you.

Nanigashi Shima

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Nanigashi Shima

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